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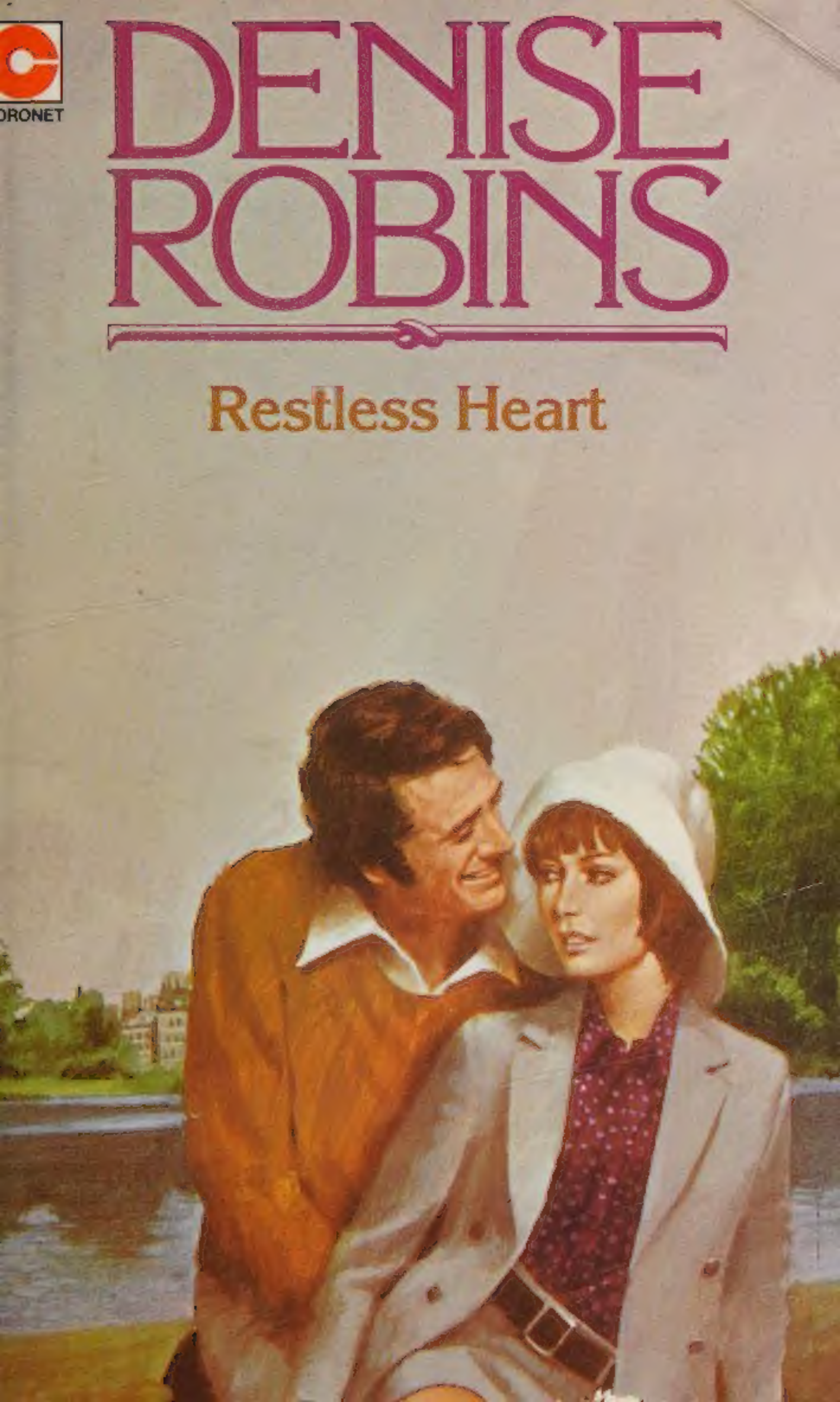
DENISE ROBINS

Restless Heart



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"I could never get through another night like last night," he said. "Don't keep me in suspense, Julia, for God's sake."

"Ivor, it wants thinking over, surely! It's such an important step to take. You're so reckless, darling. I—"

"Be reckless with me," he broke in, drawing her into his arms. "Don't fight any more, Julia. Say 'yes' to me now, now."

She drew a long, long breath and shut her eyes. And then suddenly it was as though the storm subsided in her mind and she was quite calm and secure in his embrace and serenely aware of a fate which she could not alter, of a predestined act which must be accomplished. She said:

"Very well. I'll come!"

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Restless Heart

Denise Robins

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CHAPTER I

I

WHEN Julia Daunt woke up on the 31st March, looked at the man who was still asleep in the bed beside her, realised that she was married to him and was not in the least bit in love, she was miserable.

She was not shocked, because she never had imagined that she was still in love with Bill. But during their three years together she had deluded herself into believing that she did not want anybody else. This morning she knew definitely that she was missing something in life and it was distinctly unpleasant, to say nothing of depressing to dwell on the fact that her married life, with its lack of fulfilment, might last for another thirty years.

The room was still darkish, but she could see the outline of Bill's figure and a fair, tousled head and hear the somewhat heavy breathing to which she had never quite grown accustomed. From the day of her marriage she had decided that these heavy breathings might at any moment develop into snores, and that anyhow, sounds other than those made by oneself were objectionable in the night. Certainly such sounds could never be tolerated at closer quarters. Hence the disposal of their original large bed; a disposal accompanied by groans and protests from Bill who liked, he said, being kept warm on a winter's night. But Julia was no girl to turn herself into any man's hot-water bottle. So about two months after they had settled in the cottage, the double bed went back to the shop where it was purchased and was replaced by the "twins", which Julia found far less formidable.

She had tried to pacify Bill by pointing out that his psychology was at fault in preferring the other. Too much

familiarity was bound to breed contempt, and the space between the "twins" need not be regarded as a dividing line expressing reluctance on either side. It was merely a pleasant gulf which either could cross at will, at the same time retaining some privacy.

To which he had not agreed, because Bill never did regard himself as "modern" about Julia. He was, he acclaimed, quite old-fashioned in his undivided love for her. But he agreed to the "twins" after some coaxing, and the assurances which Julia gave him that the alteration would increase rather than decrease her ardour.

This morning she lay snuggled under the bedclothes, the blanket drawn well up under her chin because it was cold, listened to the respirations of her husband, and was quite certain that the foot between the two beds was not enough. That a wall between would not have been enough, since to every four walls of a room there is always a door. That separate houses would be preferable. In other words, that she didn't want to live with Bill any more.

Now Julia was not a woman with a flimsy brain, nor one who made hasty decisions. She was of the thinking kind. She could not be called a deep thinker, but she liked to get to the bottom of subjects that perplexed her, and felt it essential that she should investigate thoroughly the unattractive discovery which she had made upon waking to-day.

Why wasn't she happy with Bill any more?

She wasn't in love with anybody else. But she had men friends and liked men. She had been brought up with a lot of brothers and cousins and had learnt to shoot and ride to hounds when she was a small girl living up in Leicestershire. And men liked her. She was good to look at and was conscious of all her best points. She considered it foolish for a woman to ignore the consciousness of her own beauty. She knew that she had a pretty, petite figure, with delightful curves where they were meant to be, a good skin, pale, perfect with the correct amount of make-up. Her hair was a curious tobacco-colour.

She wore it short and refused to have it waved or curled. It was cut straight with a gamine fringe. The dark hazel eyes could melt when she was in a soft mood, or flash the coldest of scorn in a hard one. Bill said he took his cue from the expression in her eyes. She looked eighteen instead of twenty-five. She had a quick wit and ready humour.

She had had one particular affair before she married Bill. But she had put that man out of her life and out of her mind. Now there was a man—but she wasn't going to allow herself to think about Ivor Bent this morning. He was most attractive and she had had a very amusing conversation with him at the Mackenzies' party last night. But he was married and had two children and was best not thought about. One could control one's thoughts up to a point. Only up to a point, of course, and inevitably she would recall interesting little details about Ivor Bent: his extreme slenderness—the antithesis of Bill's large, bony frame. The pallor of his face, the blackness of his hair, and the rapier-like dart of his searching, discontented eyes. The way he had of talking very quickly, smoking quickly, flicking the ash all over the floor with total disregard for ash-trays and suddenly breaking into puckish laughter when you said something funny.

But enough of Ivor Bent. She was supposed to be thinking about Bill and why she wasn't happy with him any more. And it certainly was not because of a man she had only just met and was not likely to meet again.

What had happened yesterday to annoy her? Nothing more than usual. Bill worked in the garden all day. He was mad about it. When they had bought this Tudor cottage in Lewes two years ago they had found quite a pretty garden ready-made. But Bill had had it all up. He drove the jobbing gardener, who bore the fitting name of Orchard, to distraction, by pulling up every bed he saw, grassing it over, and cutting up the turf. He moved the bird bath. He destroyed pathways and created new ones. He lifted well-established shrubs to other parts of the garden because he had his own

ideas about designing. He would have gone without meals if Julia had not screamed at him from the doorway, and insisted upon his coming in to eat.

Things should never be allowed to become obsessions, she told him. And yet it was a healthy obsession and she supposed she had no right to discourage it. He had money of his own—enough to make him independent. Bill had come into her life at a crucial right moment. Her father had just died and the big country home in which they lived was being sold. She and her mother were settling in a London flat.

Just before they left Leicester, Bill had met Julia, who was having a few days hunting with friends. She had marked him out that day in the field, attracted by his look of strength and vigour. And later, when she looked into his nice blue eyes she saw an admiration and sympathy which she needed. She was just getting over an affair with a man older than herself, which had not proved satisfactory and had resulted in his marrying somebody else. So close upon the heels of this disaster, Julia found it difficult to fall in love with Bill, but easy to love him.

When he asked her to marry him, she told him frankly that she was not in love. But he, having in his quiet fashion determined to make Julia his wife, and certain that she was the woman of his dreams, would take no refusal.

"I love you more than I can possibly tell you," he said, "and so much that I shall make you love me in time if you'll only give me a chance."

Twice she refused him. From Leicester to London he pursued her. And gradually he became a necessity. She was lost and lonely without him. Then her mother died, and that was Bill's big opportunity.

Julia married him.

"I am willing to take the risk, darling," he had said on the day they drove to Caxton Hall together about a licence.

And she had said :

"Even of me falling in love with somebody—afterwards?"

He had laughed happily and answered :

"I won't let you. I'll make you so happy that you won't want anybody else. Besides, you're not the sort of woman to let a fellow down."

That had made her laugh and weep together in his arms.

But this morning she was nearer tears than laughter as she looked back upon the three years of her marriage. For it was a dilemma. She *had* been happy -quite gloriously happy during their honeymoon, which they spent wandering through Spain and Morocco. And even more content once they had settled down here in their country cottage. But it had been a sort of surface contentment, she believed. Like the smoothness of a piece of water which can be ruffled by a breath of wind. Bill seemed more in love than ever after marriage. But Julia began to wonder if she would ever know that glorious, thrilling madness which the poets sang about, and called "love".

If, fundamentally, she was unsatisfied, she could not now imagine a life apart from Bill. They were good companions. He was a little solid and British, a little lacking, perhaps, in that spice of the devil which she had always liked in men.

He had taken a risk when he had married her, and that was what he was forgetting, Julia thought. She wanted to see Ivor Bent again—badly! But she mustn't think about Ivor. She must go on thinking about Bill.

The room was growing lighter.

She had been very happy with Bill when they had turned "Katherine's", their cottage near Lewes, into the perfect home.

In their Jag, they could make the West End in an hour and ten minutes, so that they could get up to a show or a dance with the greatest of ease, and drive back, unless they wanted to stay a night. And Julia was not far from any of her cherished racecourses—Lewes, Lingfield, Brighton or Plumpton. "Katherine's" was situated almost in the centre of them all. It was said to have belonged to Katherine of Aragon.

II

It was a lamb of a place. Julia had had a grand time furnishing it. One could do so much with those white plastered walls and oak beams. They had had all the oak pickled to a silver grey and a lot of old furniture toned down to the same colour. Bill was nothing if not generous, and he gave her *carte-blanche* when she set about making their home. They put in central heating.

Bill hated radiators. But he put up with them for Julia's sake. And he could never accuse her of being "stuffy", because she liked fresh air.

She took tremendous walks with the two Alsatians Bill had bought for her when they first came to "Katherine's" and liked to drive up to the Downs, park the car, and walk with the dogs for miles upon the springy turf, getting a keen satisfaction out of the sense of space and distance when she could look down upon the Sussex Weald. It was beautiful up there with the wind against one's face, and great clouds scudding across the sky, and the land set out like a chequerboard, oblongs of brown ploughed field, green meadows, and the dark prune of woods.

They had been awfully happy turning "Katherine's" into the perfect home. This room was lovely with its queer, odd casements, some of them still retaining the original diamond panes which they guarded jealously.

Julia could now see the travelling clock on the table between her bed and Bill's. It was seven o'clock. She heard Alice, the daily, moving about in the drawing-room below, pulling curtains. In another half-hour she would come up with the tea and let in Snoopy and Jealous, the two Alsatians, and they would both ignore Bill's bed and bound on to hers, and cover her with fawning protestations of worship. They were darlings, particularly Jealous, the dog. From a tiny puppy he had always shown his disapproval when Snoopy, the bitch, received any attention. And she had said to him: "Jealous!" so many times that it had developed into his name.

This was an hour at which Julia was rarely awake, for she was one to sleep late. But her thoughts and feelings about Bill had troubled her into this unusual state of mental activity at such an early hour. So the room looked a little unfamiliar in the pale light of the early morning. Rather nice, subduing the peach of the glossy William and Mary chintz and the brocades on the four Queen Anne chairs, which Julia had had pickled, to the horror of the dealer who sold them to her.

Why wasn't she happy with Bill any more?

The roving eye of Julia went back to the recumbent figure of her husband and there flashed through her brain the unattractive answer to this question which had troubled her since she awakened.

"Because you're bored with him."

So unattractive did the answer appear to the mind of Julia, a mind which disdained the average discontented married woman she met, Julia threw off the bedclothes and seized her dressing-gown.

Hands in her pockets she looked gloomily out at the garden. A faint greyish mist clung to the tops of the trees and wreathed itself round the ornamental pond which Bill had just finished making. It was ready prepared for lilies and goldfish. Irregular steps of old greenish stone ran up from the pond to a grass bank and thence to the tennis court which was flanked by a fine old yew hedge. Beyond lay green fields and a fringe of wood.

She turned from the scene of the misty garden and looked back at her beautiful bedroom and thought:

"Everything is lovely. Everything is as I wanted it; as I still want it. But something is gone—a sort of contentment—and I want that back more than anything. . . ."

Further thoughts of the kind were prevented by the arrival of Alice with the tea. Julia must have been awake, indulging in all this reflection much longer than she had thought. Followed by Alice with the tray, came Snoopy and Jealous, bounding joyously into the room.

Julia enveloped Jealous with both arms, laid her cheek against his muzzle and said :

"You're Julia's darling boy."

Snoopy sprang up on to the bed and seated herself with a thud upon Bill's stomach. Bill thereupon woke up with a yell, heard Julia's words and without opening his eyes, said :

"Well, thank God I'm somebody's darling boy."

Julia pushed the Alsatian away from her, ran her fingers through her hair, and turned to her husband.

"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to Jealous."

Bill Daunt, groaning under the weight of the other Alsatian who licked his face, sat up.

"Huh ! What about saying something nice to me?"

"I'm not in the mood to make nice speeches."

Daunt suddenly became wide awake, rubbed the back of his tousled head, and gave his wife a look of mild reproach.

"Now what's bitten you, darling? You made a nice speech to Jealous, didn't you?"

Julia gave him a look of scorn and he put up a warning hand.

"Don't tell me that the more you see of men the more you love dogs."

"Oh, shut up and give me a cigarette."

He flung a packet at her and lay back on his pillow.

"You're not in one of your sweetest moods. I shall go to sleep again."

Julia lit a cigarette, flung the burnt match at Bill, and departed into the bathroom. He called out after her, resentfully :

"You've got a hangover."

She shouted back through the noise of running water :

"Your psychology is as stupid as that awful triangular rose bed you've dug outside the dining-room window. Fill it with antirrhinums and it'll look like one of those tatty affairs you see in a public park."

That piece of contempt for his gardening cut Bill to the heart. He rose from his bed, knocking Snoopy off the edge,

hitched up his pyjamas, and followed his wife to the bathroom.

"Well I must say that's a wretched remark to make after all the trouble I've taken with the garden," he said.

III

Julia had removed her wrapper and her silk pyjamas. The bathroom was warm from the pipes and she stood naked in front of the mirror brushing her teeth. She was lovely undressed. She had small firm breasts, and firm, slim flanks. Her body was a warm white all over, without any suggestion of "gooseflesh". She saw Bill's reflection in the mirror, shook back the tobacco-brown hair which was falling into her eyes and spluttered at him through a froth of toothpaste :

"Do get out !"

He went but he had to be good-tempered and forgiving and bring her her cup of tea. It irritated her but she said, meekly :·

"Thank you very much, Bill."

"Not at all," said Bill, and walked away.

When he strolled into her room ready dressed for the day's work in old grey flannels and check flannel shirt of a shade of blue which matched his eyes, Julia, feeling guilty, became unaccustomedly demonstrative. She held out a hand to him.

"I was beastly just now."

He did what was expected of Bill. He came straight up, took the hand, and kissed it with an old-fashioned courtesy, which was, somehow, indicative of Bill's nature. Julia had often told him that he had an Edwardian soul.

"That's right, Ju. But why were you cross?"

She let him hold the hand and stared at the floor.

"I don't know," she said miserably.

"Have I done anything?"

"Nothing."

A healthy odour of soap, toothpaste, and tobacco emanated

from Bill. And nobody knew better than Julia that he had a healthy mind to go with his nice body.

"I must be bad," she thought. "When Bill takes my hand it doesn't thrill me at all, and I don't want to sleep with him or have his children or be anything but a sister to him. I could be a nice, affectionate sister so long as I knew that his intentions were purely brotherly."

Bill said :

"What are you doing to-day, darling?"

"I don't know."

"Are you racing?" he asked.

"Not to-day. I may run up to town and have lunch with Vi. Mac is up North on business. She asked me to spend a night, but I said I wouldn't leave you."

"Don't mind about me if you want to go," said Bill, hopeful that she would not take him at his word. He was a bit crestfallen when Julia appeared to jump at the chance he gave her.

"Wouldn't you be lonely if I stayed a night away?" Julia said, without looking at him. "I don't believe we've had a night apart since we married, have we?"

"I don't believe we have," said Bill.

"Well, I told Vi I didn't think I could."

"But do, my dear, if you think you'd enjoy it."

"All right. I will."

Bill received this with some gloom. He would not complain if Julia wished to go away for a night, but somehow he hadn't anticipated her doing so.

"That's breakfast, and I smell kippers. I'm hungry."

"Don't wait for me," said Julia, "I'll be down in a minute."

After he'd gone she flung off her wrapper, put on her nylons, and finally emerged in a grey tweed suit with a green spot silk shirt which gave her a boyish appearance. Looking in the mirror she added a touch of colour to her lips. Her eyes looked back at her, the hazel reflecting the green of her clothes. They looked suddenly bright and the pupils were dilated as though she were excited.

She realised that she was excited. The weight of depression, which had overpowered her when she came out of the bath, had lifted. She was going to have a "night off". Her first night away from Bill. She felt awful for being pleased and happy about it.

It was going to be fun to be on her own again, and with Vi. Vi Mackenzie was ten years older than Julia, but one of her great friends; the only woman friend on whom she really relied. Vi had a large house in South Kensington and a family of four children.

She was good fun, Vi, and there was a free and easy, "take it or leave it" atmosphere in her home.

"Let's be girls together, with both the husbands out of the way," Vi had told Julia at her party last night. "We'll find a couple of nice boy friends to amuse us."

And the name of Ivor Bent had been mentioned.

Perhaps Vi would ask Ivor Bent to come round to-night.

Perhaps, thought Julia, that was the cause of her excitement. If so, she had far better tell Vi that she couldn't stay and return like a dutiful wife to "Katherine's" and Bill.

But after breakfast Julia telephoned to Vi and told her that she would come and spend the night.

CHAPTER II

I

Ivor Bent wondered how much longer his nerves would stand the sound of that child screaming.

It was his own child; a girl of six. She screamed because she had a temper. It was his temper. She had inherited it. He knew all about that. Ursula, his wife, never failed to remind him of the fact whenever Ann-Louise developed one of her rages which were frequent occurrences. She had screamed since she was in the cradle. Partly from ill-health, partly because she could not get her own way. Nobody could control her. Except perhaps Ivor when he was in one of his good moods, and liked to amuse her by drawing pictures of animals or funny faces. But he wasn't very often in the mood and he had other things to do. He had to draw and paint in order to earn his living rather than pacify Ann-Louise.

Heavens! how she screamed! And he heard the tired voice of Ursula imploring her to be a good girl and not disturb Daddy. *Not disturb Daddy?* For the last two hours he had been up here in the studio trying hopelessly to sketch out a rough for a new poster. It was a commission which he knew he could carry out, but not with that noise going on. It irritated him—drove every idea out of his head Drove other things out of him, too. His good humour, his joy of living, and his love of his family. One couldn't go on feeling loving and grateful towards three people who stood in front of everything one wanted out of life.

Ivor Bent was first and foremost an artist. And an artist must not be disturbed by domestic problems and wrangles. Ursula knew it. He was sorry for Ursula. She had done her best to keep peace in the flat, but she wasn't able to. She was a

muddler. She muddled her way through life from day to day and there was always trouble. With herself and with the children and with him. He was sick to death of it all.

This flat consisted of the two upper floors of a house in Chelsea. They had taken it because the upstairs room had a skylight and a miraculous view of the river and was excellent for Ivor's work. Cheap, too, since there was no lift and they had to climb countless stairs to get to their front-door.

Ivor looked at the canvas in front of him. He disliked what he had drawn and slashed at it furiously with his crayon, which broke in two. He flung it on the floor and with his hands in his pockets, walked to the window and stared moodily out. A fine March morning and the sun just breaking through the clouds, touching the grey muddy waters of the river to dull gold. He liked to watch the sooty barges and the little steamers go up and down the Thames. Most of all he liked the tremendous chimneys of the Power House outlined against the skies. A grand building, that, triumphant and potent symbol of modern architecture in all its strength and simplicity. And particularly he liked it at night when it was flood-lit. There was something savage and splendid in it. It was primæval and modern at the same time. It represented the form of art that Ivor liked and expressed something inside himself that he had never been able to reveal to any living soul. But possibly that was a part of him which he would never reveal to anybody. The torturing ego of a man utterly egocentric, capable of the heights and the depths, fluctuating between the two, yet always with a settled and persistent love of beauty and a knowledge of things beautiful.

That great powerful naked building was of vast importance. Ivor Bent was to himself enormously important, as colossal in his egotism and selfishness as the vast lines of that piece of contemporary art out there, hewn from concrete and steel and stone. That was achievement. But Ivor Bent had achieved nothing so far—nothing that was really good. And so he was tortured and dissatisfied, and as restless as the devil.

One day he hoped to make enough money to enable him to cease being a commercial artist. Then he would begin to paint again.

He had met Ursula in London in one of the newspaper offices which had given him his first commission. She had been working on a women's journal. She had literary qualities and had been well educated. Her parents were dead and had left her penniless, in charge of an aunt, with whom she had been living when Ivor first met her. But her father was at one time in a Government House job and Ursula never let Ivor forget it. Her main fault in his eyes was her sickening snobbishness. She was also patriotic to the point of absurdity. During their rows she never failed to remind Ivor that he was half French and had all the worst qualities of both nations, and that her father had moved in British political circles and that there was not a drop of foreign blood in her or her family.

She said that she was still in love with him and he was inclined to believe her. It was flattering in a sense, but it held no thrill for him. He was quite definitely no longer in love with Ursula.

He had reached that pitch years ago—soon after the birth of Ann-Louise, in fact. Poor Ann-Louise had been a mistake not wanted by either of them.

Ivor should never have had children. He knew that. He lacked real paternal qualities. And unfortunately his two children offended his eye. Neither seemed to have inherited the slightest degree of good looks from either of their parents. He was not a bad-looking man, and Ursula had been a pretty girl.

No! Parenthood had not been a success with Ivor. Both his wife and his little girls were a disappointment.

It never entered his head to leave Ursula and he had little or no inclination to break his marital vows. He was interested in art; in women collectively, rather than individually.

Standing here in his studio this morning, disturbed by the

sobbing of his youngest child, and feeling unlike work, he remembered suddenly a woman whom he had met last night at a party.

He had found himself conversing with a woman named Julia Daunt. At first he had thought her quite young and unmarried, but afterwards discovered that in spite of her youthful and boyish appearance, she was a married woman.

Her physical side had not appealed to Ivor at first sight, because he liked the rather plump and voluptuous type. But after he had talked to her for some minutes, he had become curiously intrigued by her tobacco-coloured head, that direct way she had of looking at a man, and her clever, perceptive mind. And she had an almost masculine, logical slant on things which he found refreshing. He had talked more to her than to anybody else that night, and gone home remembering one or two things she had said, her low, amused laugh, and the queer greenish lights in her eyes. He had decided that he would like to paint her.

Now he was thinking of her again. She lived somewhere in the country. He wondered if he would see her again, and what sort of a fellow her husband was, and if she was in love with him. Or if she, too, had become conscious of the frightful way in which civilised existence laid matrimonial traps for everybody—and caught them.

Ann-Louise had stopped crying. At last there was peace in the studio. With a sigh Ivor turned back, pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and let his bright, dark, discontented eyes rove round the room. It was gracelessly untidy. Neither he nor Ursula ever managed to tidy up anywhere. It was cold, too. A gas fire spluttered and hissed in a corner and gave out little warmth, but as a rule when Ivor was working he did not notice the cold. The white walls were half hidden by paintings. Most of them done by Ivor in his youth, work that he realised held a touch of genius, but just missed it somewhere. Crude, vivid oils, violent seascapes, savage mountains with a Spanish atmosphere. He and Ursula had

spent their honeymoon in Spain. And one or two heads of Ursula.

Ivor advanced to the easel, picked up another piece of charcoal, and drew a thick line across the paper.

II

The studio door opened. Ivor swung round with a click of the tongue. Why the devil must he be interrupted just as he was starting to work again? Ursula stood in the doorway ready dressed to go out. He looked at her indifferently. She wore a black cloth coat over a woolly suit and hat on the back of her head. Her hair was growing long and was bushing about her face. It wanted thinning and setting. She had obviously dressed hurriedly and there was a whitish dab of powder on the side of her nose and a smear of lipstick at the corner of her mouth. Her cold did not add to her attractions.

He was not mean about giving her money when he had it, so she could have been better turned out. But she had no real ideas about clothes. He had learned that, and if she had a lovely dress which he occasionally chose for her, she couldn't wear it. She always managed to look untidy. He said:

"I'm busy, Ursula. What do you want?"

"Money," she said in a tired voice.

She was always tired these days. She had had gay blue eyes and a sweet smile when she had married Ivor Bent. But the sweetness had gone out of the smile, and now it was just weary and her eyes were more often than not brooding and resentful. She still adored Ivor, but she resented furiously his attitude towards herself and the family and his whole outlook upon life.

"I haven't got any cash," said Ivor, and went on with his drawing.

"Then I must have a cheque."

"Oh, God!" he said, "can't a fellow be left alone in peace for five minutes? I gave you five quid the day before yesterday."

"Well, you owed me that. It's the housekeeping money I want to-day."

"What have you done with the fiver?"

"Spent it on loose living, darling," she said.

"Oh, don't be sarcastic."

"Well, what do you think I've done with it? Paid the gas bill, of course. I told you I was going to. We'd had the second demand note, and you didn't want it cut off, did you?"

"I don't care a hell."

She gave her weary smile.

"Nor do I, except that we've got to cook with it."

"Well, we're spending too much," said Ivor. "No matter what I give you, you always seem to want more. You manage so darn badly."

"That's right. Blame it on me. And whatever you do, darling, don't remember that you're the one that has the gas full on up here all the morning, and that very often you leave it on unless I remember to send Mrs. Rogers up to turn it off. And don't remember that you hadn't any money for the taxi you took the other night and I had to give you ten shillings out of the housekeeping and . . ."

He cut in tersely :

"Don't nag, for heaven's sake."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's no good your being beastly to me just because I want my housekeeping money."

"I don't begrudge you the money!" he half shouted. "I'm not mean to you, am I? But I do hate being interrupted when I start working. I've had that kid yelling downstairs the whole morning."

"I'm sorry. She was in one of her tempers. It's been difficult for me to cope with her. I really don't want to have to cope with you now as well."

Her voice cracked a little as though she was going to cry. Ivor calmed down. After all, he supposed she hadn't enjoyed her morning any more than he had, and she did look tired.

He thrust a hand in his pocket and pulled out a couple of pound notes.

"Take these. I'll write you a cheque after lunch."

She took the money and put it in her bag.

"Thanks, darling. Sorry I had to interrupt you. I meant to ask for it at breakfast."

He nodded in mute acceptance of her apology. That was always the trouble with Ursula. She was full of good intentions. Meant to do a thousand things but never did them. He drew his thumb across a thick crayon line and smeared it into shape, and then stepped back, half closing his eyes, critically.

Of course Ivor was right about her managing badly. Ursula knew it. She had no method. She ran up bills before she knew where she was. The situation in the kitchen was nearly always hopeless. At the moment they had an elderly daily, Mrs. Rogers.

Ursula struggled gallantly with the rest of the duties which she had taken on when she married. In fact she had long since ceased to worry about her own literary ambitions. She had always wanted to write a book or play. She would never do it now. There wasn't time. Besides, Ivor was so brilliant and popular, he could always outshine her.

Inwardly Ursula Bent resented these things. She still loved him. Her early passion for him had endured through the bitterness and unrest which had been so rife between them since Ann-Louise was born. The hardest thing that she was called upon to bear was her secret knowledge that he was no longer in love with her. He had never actually told her so, but she knew it.

She adored the children. Flip was a cheerful little soul and they had great times together, although possibly it was for the ill-tempered, puny little Ann-Louise that she felt the deepest love. Mainly because she knew that Ivor did not care much for the child and instinctively that very thought roused Ursula's maternal compassion.

Now, Ursula came further into the studio and peered over Ivor's shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"A poster for the new airport."

She sniffed and then blew her nose.

He hunched a shoulder irritably.

"Don't blow the germs all over me, there's a good girl. I don't want another cold this year."

"Sorry, darling," she said, and moved away.

He was not by nature unkind and as soon as he had been ill-humoured with Ursula he regretted it because he knew that she was easily hurt. He turned and said :

"Buy yourself a hat. I promised you one the other day."

"Thanks awfully, but I think we'll settle the electric light bill before we spend the money on hats," she said, and smiled at him.

"Well, get it if you'd like it," he said, and smiled back at her.

Her heart warmed to that smile. How charming Ivor could be when he wanted. Dangerously charming—the Ivor with whom she had fallen so deeply and irretrievably in love eleven years ago, when she was twenty. And she thought how young he still looked. Nobody would think he was thirty-five. He might be seven or eight years younger. It was his figure. He was so slight and moved with such swift grace, and there wasn't a grey thread in the inky blackness of his hair. He was letting it grow a bit long. One lock continually fell across his eyes and he pushed it out of the way with a nervous gesture. He had fine nervous hands, artists' fingers, more often than not smeared with paint or charcoal. When he was working like this he wore old grey flannels, an open shirt, and a woolly pullover. He was handsome.

Secretly she worshipped the fine, drawn lines of his face with the high cheek-bones which he had inherited from his French mother, and the flame in his eyes when he was angry or passionately discoursing about philosophy and art. And that wide mouth which could be so tender and so cruel.

She had a sudden overwhelming desire for physical contact with him, for an assurance of his physical as well as his mental goodwill towards her. She felt unusually emotional in spite of the fact that Ann-Louise had started to cry again and was calling "Mummy" at the top of her voice because she had been left alone in the bedroom.

Ursula moved towards her husband.

"Darling," she murmured.

He knew that she wanted him to kiss her. Immediately he withdrew from her and was repelled by her physical advance. She was unattractive to him with her untidy hair and her lips and nose swollen a little with the cold. He wanted to be left alone. That was the trouble with Ursula. She could never leave him alone. Hurriedly he bent and touched her forehead.

"Bye-bye."

And almost immediately, in contrition for his secret repulsion, he added :

"Get yourself that hat."

She turned away from him, disappointed though not astonished by his coldness. She closed the door behind her and went downstairs.

In her bedroom where Ursula had opened the window which looked on to the dark gloom of fire escapes and backyards, she found pale pink face powder all over her brushes and sprinkled on the carpet. A way in which Ann-Louise had tried to alleviate boredom while she was alone.

"Oh, you *are* a naughty girl !" said Ursula sadly.

"I've lost my doggie !" said Ann-Louise, and set up a fresh wail.

Ursula pulled her off the chair and shook her a little, looking at the ceiling.

"Darling, do shut up. Daddy's trying to work upstairs. We'll find doggie when we come back. We're going out now."

Ann-Louise commenced a lengthy argument to which Ursula did not listen. She took off the child's disfiguring spectacles, and wiped the little face which bore a curious resemblance to

her father's, at times. On one knee before her, Ursula wiped away the tears, combed her hair, and put on her beret and glasses again. She loved the naughty, unhappy child with all her heart.

"Come along out and stop crying, darling, do!"

And then when they were down and nearly going out of the front door, and Ann-Louise had been pacified, a thought flashed through the confusion in Ursula's mind. Mixed up with a list of things that she had to buy: the steak for lunch, a vegetable for to-night, more Omo for Mrs. Rogers, sponge-cakes for Ann-Louise, and a new pencil box which she had promised Flip she would get at Woolworth's. There was something else that she remembered she must do; something that she had forgotten to tell Ivor just now. With a caution to Ann-Louise not to stir from the front-door step without her, Ursula turned and fled upstairs again. Up dozens of flights which made her back ache again, and into the studio.

"Oh, Ivor——" she began breathlessly.

He had just begun to do some good work and turned round in fury.

"What the devil——"

"Darling, I'm sorry, but I forgot to tell you something important."

"What?"

"A Mrs. Mackenzie rang up. She's asked us to dine to-night. I said I couldn't go because I've got this cold, and besides it's Mrs. Rogers' night out and I can't leave the children alone, but if you want to go, will you ring her up?"

The irritation died in Ivor. With a look of interest he regarded his wife.

"Mrs. Mackenzie—that's the woman I met last night. Doris and Jim took me round to her house. She's rather a nice creature with an enormous family and pots of cash."

"Well, she seems to have taken a fancy to you, darling, and I'm sure she won't mind if I don't go."

Ivor raised his brows.

"That's rot, but of course, if you've got a cold and you can't leave the kids, you can't."

"Are you going then?"

He considered his drawing reflectively.

"I wonder who else will be there."

"She said that she's asked the Robinsons but they couldn't go, but that she's got some man there whom you've met. I can't remember the name, and some woman staying with her called Daunt."

A tiny flame, small, yet potent, leapt in Ivor Bent. Julia Daunt. *So she was going to be there.* And if he went he would see her again. He had a swift vision of her, straight and slim with her neat boy's head, and her brusque, yet attractive manner.

He said :

"Oh well, I might as well go. I've got nothing else to do. I'll 'phone in a minute."

Ursula went downstairs and thought :

"This is the second night running he's gone out and left me alone. He doesn't seem to care. He's frightfully selfish."

And then she hurried down the long flights of stairs. Ann-Louise was crying again because she had been left alone, and Ursula did not want her to disturb the people in the other flats.

CHAPTER III

I

DINNER was over.

In the Mackenzies' dining-room, the electric lights had been switched off. The table was left as Vi liked it during dessert, with six candles in two tall silver candelabra burning softly and goldenly through the gloom.

The rest of the room was in shadow. Julia preferred it this way. Vi's dining-room in full glare was a little ultra-modern for her taste, but in this soft light everything looked mysterious and beautiful. The long table with its black glass top was a dark pool to reflect the candles, and the rich red of the carnations in the bowl, and the delicate blush-pink of peaches, the green of apples, and the purple of grapes silvered with bloom, were lovely splashes of colour.

Vi had put Julia in Mac's place, as he was away, facing her at the other end of the table. She could barely see her friend, who was hidden by the silver candlesticks and the flowers. George Hargreaves, her oldest and best friend, carried on a conversation with his hostess which Julia could not hear. But she did not want to see or hear. Her attention was wholly concentrated upon the man on her right. The whole of dinner seemed to have been a duologue between her and Ivor Bent. She had only talked in snatches with Vi and George.

Ivor had so much to say and she had listened and talked in her turn, knowing as she had known last night, that they might talk for hours, for days, for months, and still have something to say to each other.

He was a brilliant conversationalist, Ivor Bent. And tonight he was at the top of his form. He touched on the subjects that interested him most. Art, philosophy, beauty, and

the urge of the creative spirit. Things which he understood. They were new subjects to her, yet immensely fascinating. She believed that she could understand very well if she tried.

Ivor Bent had a rich and fertile imagination and he captured hers and amazed her by his fecundity. She liked to watch him while he talked, watch him brush with long, nervous fingers that dark lock of hair that continually fell across his eyes; watch him make gestures in a manner not altogether English; and see that fine-drawn face with its high cheekbones light up with ardour when he was pressing a point, or describing something that particularly attracted him.

He was full of nervous energy, Julia thought. Alive as Bill could never be; as no other man she had ever met before had been. Of course he was self-centred. He could not conceal that. But it amused her. And she liked it when he suddenly stopped talking about himself or on his own subjects, and gave her one of those curiously piercing glances and said something intimate to her or about her.

"I've never seen hair like yours before," he had said *a propos* of nothing, during the middle of dinner, and he had leaned forward and looked at it closely : "It's a most pleasant change after all the artificial curls and waves. It's almost straight, isn't it? And the colour of a cigar."

She had smiled and said :

"A good one, I hope."

"Oh, a Corona-Corona."

"Then it should be dry and crackle."

"And have a divine aroma," he had said.

Then he had put out a finger and run it lightly over the hair that covered her ear and added :

"It isn't like a cigar to touch. And it isn't soft and silky. It's vital, buoyant hair. Like the mane of a young wild pony. I'd like to paint you standing on a moor in the wind holding on to the neck of a moorland horse. How well you'd blend."

She had thrilled strangely to the touch of his finger and had

laughed to cover a certain confusion which the intimate gesture roused in her. And she had said :

"Do you think I look a horsey woman?"

"God, no! But there's something about you which has the aura; a slim thoroughbred, with sensitive nostrils, and that rough brown hair of yours. You like horses, don't you?"

"I adore them. I used to ride a lot, but had to stop because I had a fall and hurt my back."

"Thank the lord you didn't break it," he had said.

And he had said the words in a way which suggested that he was profoundly glad that she had not broken her back, and shocked even by the thought that she might have done so.

He could establish an amazing mental contact which had something almost frighteningly physical about it, Julia thought. She had not known him twenty-four hours, but æons. She had always known him and he knew everything about her.

He said :

"Will you sit for me one day and let me try to paint that hair of yours?"

She laughed self-consciously and said :

"My hair seems to amuse you."

Ivor answered :

"Not amuse. That's the wrong word. It intrigues me. It has a personality of its own, and that isn't a thing I can say about the heads of a million women."

"I should think it would be very boring to sit for anybody," she said.

"Hideously. But will you?"

"How much will the model get?"

He said, disappointed :

"All women are mercenary, even you."

"I was only joking."

"It's as well. I'm a poor artist and would have little to give, but 'Had I the Heavens' embroidered cloths, enwrought with golden and silver light—I would spread the cloths under your feet' . . ."

" 'But I, being poor, have only my dreams.' "

"You know your Yeats," said Ivor, pleased.

Julia drew her table napkin across her lips, leaving a curve of scarlet upon it, put out a hand and took a cigarette from the silver box in front of her.

"I do."

"Then 'Tread softly, because you tread upon my dreams,' " finished Ivor.

She shook her head at him, cigarette between her lips.

"You're a flourishing and popular painter of half the good posters that one sees in London. You can't be poor."

"You flatter me. And I remain the poor artist with his dreams."

"I wouldn't like to tread on them."

"I wouldn't like it, either," he said earnestly, then leant forward and applied a match to her cigarette.

His intensity half amused and half frightened her. He jested lightly. Yet there was a dynamic force behind it all which disturbed her. Even while it fascinated, she resented being so disturbed. She turned from Ivor deliberately and addressed herself to George Hargreaves.

Ivor Bent looked at the determined profile of Julia shadowed by candlelight and thought :

"She isn't like any other woman I've met. She's aloof and she's unhappy. Both qualities are dangerous in an attractive woman."

He turned to his hostess and for a few moments conversed lightly with her.

"I think it was so good of you to have me along here this evening," he said.

"I'm so glad the Robinsons brought you to our party last night," said Vi, "I've often admired your poster work, Mr Bent."

"It's good tripe," he said.

"Isn't that what the world asks for?"

"The vast majority, maybe. But thank heaven true art doesn't rely on box-office receipts."

Major Hargreaves pricked up his ears and looked across the table at the younger man.

"That, my dear fellow, sounds a very obscure sort of remark, and I'm not sure what it means."

"Darling George," said Vi, "you aren't an obscure person, and it means exactly what Mr. Bent feels. The things that attract the masses and crowd the gallery, speaking in theatrical symbols, are not necessarily good art."

"I'm out of this," said George sadly, "I never was an artistic sort of chap."

Julia turned back to Ivor and with a sudden spirit of mischief welling in her, she said :

"Are you an artistic sort of chap?"

"Heaven forbid!" he said angrily.

"Anyhow," put in Vi, "Mr. Bent underrates himself by calling his work tripe."

"I paint to make money," said Ivor. "Nothing really good can possibly be inspired by the delicate attempt to make money."

"Then what is the true incentive for true art?" asked Julia.

"That inexplicable something within yourself which makes you achieve a thing without caring a damn whether it sells or not."

"Must the real artist always be the starving fanatic?"

"Certainly not," said Ivor promptly. "The starving artist, nine times out of ten, has to commercialise his gifts in order to live. That's the diabolical catch in life. You need money in order to sit down and wait for the inspiration."

"Which might never come," said Julia.

"But it might," he said, and looked straight into her eyes.

She felt her face burn.

Said Vi :

"I'm all for tripe, anyhow. It's a form of genius. And I don't see why a good poster shouldn't be a thing of art."

Ivor gave his charming, youthful smile.

"You're quite right. Relatively speaking it can be. But when the poster is torn off the hoarding it's burnt on the rubbish heap. And who wouldn't rather paint a picture that will live?"

"Have you ever had a thing hung in the Academy?" asked George Hargreaves, looking at Ivor.

"I don't aspire to that, sir," said Ivor. "The National Gallery is good enough for me."

Julia thought: "He's gorgeously conceited. And he has a cruel twist to his lips when he's being sarcastic. I believe I could adore this man!"

Then Vi rose and said:

"Hurry up and finish your cigarettes, you two men. In the absence of my cherished spouse, I suggest that you don't sit here telling low stories for the next hour, but that you join the ladies."

Julia, cigarette in hand, walked out of the room and felt Ivor Bent's restless, brilliant eyes following her.

In front of the drawing-room fire once again the two women sat and gossiped.

"An amazing young man, that Mr. Bent," said Vi.

"A little exhausting, perhaps," said Julia.

"I thought you seemed to be getting on very well."

Julia actually blushed.

"We were. Of course he talks above my head. I mean I've never been made to think so quickly or so deeply as he made me do this evening. He has a fascinating mind. But it's a bit breath-taking."

"He's clever."

"I'm not sure how clever. I'm not sure whether some of it isn't bluff. But still it's entertaining. Do you think he talks to his wife like that all day?"

"I should hope not, but it would be worse still if he talked to her like it all night."

Julia shook her head at her friend.

"Your mind harps on one subject."

"And a very nice one too," said Vi, and leaned comfortably back on her cushions.

Julia took her gold cigarette-case, which Bill had given her as one of his wedding-presents, out of the black evening bag which was studded with seed pearls and had been another present from him in Monte Carlo. But on second thoughts she did not take a cigarette. She was smoking too much. It was foolish. She had opened the case, and before she snapped it together again, saw the inscription in Bill's hand-writing: *"J. from B. with all my love."* And she thought that it was sad to think of B. down there alone to-night in the cottage smoking his own cigarettes over the fire, with only the dogs for company, whilst J. sat up here thrilled to the core by another man; by an artist who talked in noble sweeping terms about the soul, and made her more acutely conscious of her body than she had ever been in her life before.

"I wonder what his wife's like," she suddenly voiced her thoughts aloud.

"Doris Robinson knows her. Says she has red hair, is dowdy, but nice."

"There goes that awful word again," said Julia.

"Shattering," said Vi. "It damned the poor woman the moment I heard it."

"Is he supposed to be fond of her?"

"Who knows? Doris didn't volunteer much information about their private life. You're interested, aren't you, Ju?"

"Quite definitely," said Julia, "but it doesn't seem right that I should be."

"Darling, how provincial!"

"But I'm not really. I'm frightfully 'County'."

"Well, enjoy yourself while you can. And Bill ought to be the first to wish you to."

"Men don't wish their wives to enjoy themselves with other men," said Julia.

"Darling, anybody'd think you were the mother of four instead of me."

"Well, I'm giving birth to a whole lot of new ideas tonight, anyhow," said Julia.

"With Ivor Bent as the father," said Vi.

There was no chance for Julia to reply to that flippancy, because the door opened and the two men came in.

Hargreaves, rolling a cigar round his fingers, came first. He surveyed Vi with melancholy gentle appreciation and sat beside her on the sofa, pulling up each trouser leg as he did so, and heaving a long sigh :

"Ah, well! Here we are! Delightful dinner. Delightful house. Charming women. Not too bad to be alive."

Ivor walked straight up to Julia, who had taken her favourite place on her hassock and was sitting with her chin on her hands. He stood with his back to the fire and smiled down into her eyes.

"You look like a little girl sitting there. Rather a rebellious little girl. Are you rebellious?"

George Hargreaves cut in :

"All women are born rebels, my dear fellow. Born rebels."

Vi nudged him furiously and whispered :

"Shut up, George. Deliver your platitudes to me, and let Julia answer for herself."

Julia did answer for herself. She said :

"I don't think I'm particularly rebellious, and there isn't much of the little girl about me."

"I don't mean a sweet little girl with frills and curls," said Ivor, "but a tomboy with that brown rough hair full of bits of fern and dry leaves and fingers stained with blackberry juice and lips purple with blackberries."

"He's off again," said Vi under her breath, and twinkled over the rim of her glasses at the major.

Julia kept her gaze on Ivor Bent. With sudden sharpness she said :

"Do you always draw mental sketches of the people you meet, as well as black and white ones?"

"Only if somebody inspires a picture."

"Well, I don't think I could be anybody's inspiration. And so far you've got me all wrong."

He gave her that dark, quick, angry look that she was beginning to know. He obviously liked the things he said to be a success. It was refreshing after Bill, who never said anything with an ulterior motive.

"I don't think I'm so wrong about you."

"Well, so far I'm a cross between a colt and a little brown girl picking blackberries."

"Well, isn't that you?"

"No." She held his gaze and smiled. "I'm a sophisicated modern young woman to be found at most race meetings."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That's the picture you may draw of yourself and what you may make of yourself. But I think of you in the other way. You aren't at all typical of the racy woman."

"Aren't I?"

"No. They don't know how to live."

"Please teacher," said Julia, "tell me what to do in order to live properly."

"Spend your days," said Ivor, "with somebody who will make you forget that there is such a thing as time, and regret that you can't put back the hands of the clock when you realise that they're going on and on and on. And spend your days doing such wonderful things that all ordinary forms of recreation would become repugnant to you."

"And is that how you live?" asked Julia.

"No," he said, and he added under his breath: "But wouldn't it be grand if one could!"

Her lips trembled into a smile and they laughed together. A warm secret understanding passed from his eyes into hers, and it was as though he said:

"I could spend all my days with you and there would be no time."

And she answered:

"Teach me to live that way . . ."

She had to drag her gaze away when the butler came up with a tray bearing the coffee.

Ivor Bent refused coffee.

"It's disastrous for me. It keeps me awake."

"Not like George," said Vi. "Nothing keeps him awake."

"How do you know?" asked Julia.

And then they all laughed, and Major Hargreaves held up a hand and said :

"Order, please. You young things! There are no reserves today."

"There are really," said Julia. "Outwardly there may be a lot of loose talk, but if anything I think people are more reserved than ever deep down inside."

Ivor Bent thought :

"*You* have reserves. You have a hard, practical side, but it would be a thrilling surrender when it came."

Then suddenly Vi announced that she wanted to go to a cinema.

"It may be abominably rude for a hostess to break up her own dinner party, but I cannot sit here and do my tapestry work all the evening when my husband's away. I want to go out and play."

"What do you want to play?" asked Julia.

"Being seventeen with George in a cinema. We could hold hands and I could put my head on his shoulder at the sentimental moments. There's a gorgeous film on just down the road called 'It Wasn't Love'. Do let us go and find out what it was."

George Hargreaves, having settled himself down with his cigar, full of good food, good wine, and Mac's best brandy, had looked forward to an evening of luxurious peace and comfort beside his cherished friend, but he rose gallantly to the occasion :

"I'll take you to the pictures, my dear, with pleasure. What about the others?"

Ivor Bent had liked his hostess very much until now. But

for a moment there was murder in his heart. He wanted to go on talking to Julia, looking at Julia. He didn't want to sit in a stuffy cinema, and watch the banalities, the imbecilities, the indescribably childish antics of screen artists for whom he had a secret and profound loathing. And neither did he intend to be polite about it. He had always found that the best way to behave was to be sincere at a time when everybody else was insincere. So he said coldly :

"I hope you won't think me rude if I say I hate the cinema."

"How could you!" said Vi. "Those lovely, luscious pictures where everything comes right in the end, and everyone falls into the right person's arms. I couldn't bear life without my bit of make-believe."

Julia found herself supporting Ivor.

"I'm not keen on the cinema. I like a very good picture, but it has to be good."

"Oh dear," said Vi, disappointed.

Then looking from Ivor's black handsome head to the brown one of her friend, a brilliant thought struck the hostess of the party. The dimples returned to her cheeks. She said :

"Now you two seem to have lots to say to each other, so let's be really unconventional and break this party up into pairs. George and I will go to the pictures and you two can stay here and have a good natter over the fire until we come back."

So brilliant did this suggestion appear to Ivor Bent, that he forgot to be annoyed that anything he had to say should be termed as "natter". He looked eagerly at Julia. She looked back and her pulses thrilled in a way that they had not done since the days when she had been in love with Bill.

"Could I amuse you?" he asked, "or would you rather go to the pictures? Of course I will if you wish."

"No, I'd like to stay and talk," she said.

And then things moved quickly. Vi went off to find her fur coat and gloves. The butler fetched a taxi, and George Hargreaves found himself *en route* for the local cinema, slightly dazed.

"Vi dear," he said. "Those two—I mean—wasn't it a little discourteous, leaving them like that?"

"You are a dear old fool, George darling. It's exactly what they wanted."

He turned this over slowly and doubtfully in his mind.

"He's a very attractive young fellow and she's a most attractive young woman, but she's happily married, isn't she, Vi? That husband of hers seemed a very nice chap."

"I don't want to hear that word 'nice' again to-night," said Vi, "and what's more, Julia's bored and finding life difficult and I think it's good for her to come out of her shell."

Julia, left alone with Ivor Bent, herself feeling a little dazed at the turn the evening had taken, was at that very moment asking herself whether she had not better run away from Ivor Bent and get back into her shell as quickly as possible.

She had started off in a very proper manner by saying:

"What would you like to do? Play scrabble or look at TV, or something? I feel I ought to entertain you now that our hostess has deserted us."

Ivor answered in his own way. With a total disregard for that feeble attempt on her part to put up a barrier, he impudently walked straight across the room to the hassock on which Julia was still sitting, pulled her up into his arms, and kissed her on the mouth.

II

Julia had been kissed a number of times in her life before she married Bill, and for the last three years only by Bill. This embrace from Ivor came as a shock, to say the least of it. There had been no working up to it on his part, not even a tentative suggestion that he might behave in such a fashion. On the other hand, she had been fully conscious that he had wanted to kiss her ever since he had entered the house to-night. And equally conscious of the fact that she had wanted him to do it.

But when she was actually in his arms and she was being

kissed by him in a manner both subtle and experienced, she knew that no other kiss in her life had ever had quite the same effect. It was as though she, the married woman of three years duration, was in the arms of a lover for the first time in her life.

She felt his hand on the back of her neck and his fingers thread through the thickness of her hair and with his lips an inch away from hers, he murmured :

"I wanted to touch your hair -wanted to terribly. You're terribly attractive. Do you know that? Do you?"

Her eyes had closed and her limbs had relaxed in his arms. She felt ecstasy and a sense of shame because of Bill. Suddenly she put out a hand and laid it between Ivor's mouth and hers as though to ward off a second attempt on his part to kiss her.

"Please—don't," she whispered.

At once he let her go. She felt weak at the knees and sat down on the sofa and remained quite motionless, staring into the fire and not at him !

He said :

"That was very wonderful. For me, anyhow."

She did not answer. He looked at her and thought :

"She's in love with me. That's why she's upset. If she had taken that kiss lightly she would have laughed about it or at least reproached me."

And suddenly he believed that he was in love again, with Julia, and that the years with Ursula meant nothing. He felt immensely young and uncynical and elevated into the realms of his idealistic boyhood. He looked longingly at the bent head of Julia.

"Ought I to be sorry? Ought I to apologise?" he asked in a humble voice.

With hands clasped tightly about her knee, so tightly that the knuckles gleamed white, she looked up at him and became articulate : "I don't want an apology. But I think you should be sorry."

"Why?"

She made a gesture of confusion. Her mind was confused

and her body was still taut and trembling with the passion that his kiss had roused in her. She said :

"Because you should."

"That's a little girl's answer."

"But I'm not a little girl," she said wildly. "And I didn't want you to kiss me."

"Is that true?"

"No!" she said and put her face in her hands.

"You're grand," he said and sat down beside her, took her hands away from her face and held them. "Julia, you're a superb person, and you are rebellious—I told you you were. Only don't rebel against me. I'm in love with you."

"You can't be. I only met you last night."

"Last night and to-night. Centuries. Long enough for one to know a thing like this. It's immense. It's removed from anything trivial or ordinary. But then you're like no ordinary woman. I'm crazy about you."

She pulled away from his fingers. Her face was a bright pink and her eyes looked frightened.

"Ivor, go away quickly. Go away and never come back again."

He laughed and shook his head.

"I'd do almost anything you asked me but that."

"But you must see that this sort of thing can't happen."

"Too late. It has happened."

"You're a mad sort of creature and you're trying to make me as mad as yourself."

"You could be so very mad if you wanted to, Julia. And anyhow, aren't you tired of being sane? I am."

"Have you no sense of right and wrong?"

"That sounds like somebody's mother."

"I'm nobody's mother. But I'm somebody's wife."

He looked at the ring on her marriage finger.

"I'd almost forgotten that."

"Anyone might think I had, too," said Julia in a breathless voice, and got up and searched blindly for her evening bag and

a cigarette. But Ivor followed her and imprisoned her hands again.

"Don't run away from me. Don't take yourself thousands of miles away. You've been so close all the evening."

"No I haven't. You take too much for granted."

"I merely have the courage to admit a truth which you're afraid to accept."

"If it's a truth," she said, "that we've been close together, then it's equally true that we have no right to be."

He kept her hands and looked down at her searchingly.

"Are you going to say to me—'let's be friends'?"

"No," said Julia, and added under her breath: "Because I know that wouldn't be possible."

"Of course it wouldn't, darling," he said softly, and pulled her into his arms again.

For another shattering moment, Julia felt the potency of his kiss upon her mouth and his sensitive fingers opening and closing over little handfuls of her hair.

She felt lost and powerless. Unlike the level-headed person who had made a home with Bill Daunt and built up her life around him. Now she knew that she had been crazy to marry a man whom she did not love, in order to risk *this*—this coming into her life of a man she *could* love.

Now she knew that all her lack of contentment, her restlessness, were problems which could be solved. And the solution was Ivor Bent. Yes, he was the answer to all those dissatisfied feelings which had surged in her since she awoke this morning. Was it only this morning? It seemed a thousand years since she had slept beside Bill in that oak-beamed bedroom at "Katherine's".

Bill had become the stranger. But this Ivor she had known intimately for an incalculable time. Known and wanted him as he wanted her.

"Oh, heavens!" said Julia to herself. "This can't go on. This must stop."

She made another effort to extricate herself from Ivor's

embrace and from the labyrinth of her emotions. She went back to the sofa and sat down again and in a small, shaken voice, appealed to him :

"Will you please not do that again?"

"You don't know how much I want you," he said. "You have the most extraordinary effect on me. With you in my arms I don't feel a mere man. I'm a god. And the sweetness of your kiss is something extraordinary and imperishable."

She shook her head at him.

"You have such a gift of words."

"Has nobody else ever said things like that to you?"

"Nobody."

"Ah, Julia! Herrick loved a Julia. And Herrick has always been one of my favourite poets. Perhaps when he died he put something of himself into me, and I have waited these hundreds of years to find another Julia."

She looked at him dumbly. She found herself wondering, quite incongruously, what Bill would think of Ivor Bent. And the answer was swift and unsatisfactory. Bill wouldn't like him. Bill wouldn't understand any man who could talk this way or feel these things.

Said Ivor :

"Just now you asked me whether I had a sense of right and wrong. I have. And I think it's quite right to love you. It must be. Nothing has ever seemed more right in my life. And you love me, don't you? Say it!"

She shook her head.

"No. I'm not going to. I don't think I do love you, Ivor. I might if I had time. I'm dreadfully attracted. But I don't think it can be love—in so short a time."

"Darling," he said. "The name of that film your friend has gone to see 'It Wasn't Love'. What was it? Just passion? Well, there's something more than physical urge between *us*. We were meant for each other. I knew it from the moment I met you last night. And I've never stopped thinking about you and I never will."

She could not help being glad that he had said that. And she looked at him with a sudden tenderness breaking through the chaos of her emotions. Her kiss had turned him into a god, he said. He looked like a young god there, winged, on the tips of his toes, his dark eyes agate-bright and his face drained of colour.

She had a warm desire to pull him down on to the sofa beside her, to pull that black head on to her breast and hold it there and be gentle with him. There was something tragic in him. He wanted to have faith in her.

There came a sudden despair into the heart of Julia.

"I could love him," she thought. "I could be desperately in love. Why am I not free?"

And almost immediately she remembered that he, too, was tied. For both of them, those two kisses, those two embraces, had been acts of betrayal! To his wife and to her husband—and to themselves.

She managed to find the cigarette for which she had been looking a moment ago, lit it, and calmed her nerves.

"Sit down and talk to me, Ivor," she said.

He came towards the sofa, but she put up a warning hand.

"No, opposite me. Not too near."

He gave that sudden puckish smile which she liked so much. He had humour. Thank goodness he knew how essential it was to keep a sense of humour at a time like this, and not allow heavy drama to develop out of the divine spontaneity of their acknowledged attraction for each other.

"I think I'll stand," he said, and leaned against the fireplace, both hands in his pockets, looking down at her through narrowed lids. How beautifully her head was set on her shoulders, he thought. Her throat was narrow and delicate.

At length she said :

"Ivor Bent, you and I are both married."

He nodded.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well—what?"

"Well, doesn't the fact suggest that it would be wiser to steer clear of danger?"

"Admitting that there is danger—who wants to steer clear of it?"

"I do," said Julia.

"No, you don't."

She coloured and flicked the ash from her cigarette a trifle angrily.

"Oh yes, I do. You take too much for granted."

"Darling, I take nothing for granted, except that you can't help loving me any more than I can help loving you. It's just happened that way. It's one of these sudden, inspired affairs that it would be a sin to control, even if we could control it."

"We can and must."

"Are you in love with your husband?" he asked abruptly.

She hesitated. She knew so well that she was not. Nevertheless, she still felt a sense of loyalty towards Bill.

She tried to concentrate on the thought of their home and the warm safe wall which they had built about themselves when they laid the foundations of their matrimonial career. But she felt afraid. There was a crack widened every time Ivor Bent looked down into her eyes with his and made her heart jolt in that dizzy fashion.

"Answer me, Julia," said Ivor. "Are you in love with your husband?"

"I'm devoted to him."

"That's conclusive."

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that you aren't in love."

"Oh, don't be so clever!"

At once he bent and caught her hand.

"Sweet, I'm not trying to be clever. You're just devoted. I understand that. I'm devoted to Ursula too. But I'm far from being in love, and haven't been for years."

Julia let him hold her hand, and with the other kept the cigarette close to her lips, smoking feverishly while she tried to steady her thoughts and feelings. The name "Ursula" came as a sudden jar to her susceptibilities. Ursula was Mrs. Bent - wife of this man who had taken her in his arms and brought to life something which might be merely physical, but which also had a disastrous effect upon her mind.

"Don't let's get shoddy about the phrases we use or the terms in which we speak," she said. "Let's consider what devotion means, and what it consists of."

"I do like you, Julia," he said. "I do like your mentality. It's grand. Most women are swayed entirely by emotion, but you use your brains."

She had to smile at him.

"I'm not going to be flattered. I'm going to go on using my brain if I can. But it's so feeble compared with yours."

"I'm not really clever, Julia," he said with a humility which Ursula would not have recognised. "And you make me realise what I lack. I started out in life with all kinds of great aspirations and ideas and most of them have died on me. I haven't found it easy to be the man I wanted to be. And by the man I mean the real artist. You used the word 'shoddy' just now. Perhaps I have been a trifle shoddy in what I've done. That's because I've had to do it for money."

"You're talking about your work."

"Yes."

"You've had to earn your living. And it doesn't matter if you haven't achieved what you meant to as a painter, so long as you haven't been shoddy as a person."

His fingers stirred restlessly in hers.

"Well, don't let's go into that. I dare say as a person I'm detestable."

"I think you're so very attractive."

"My sweet - my sweet Julia, I wish I were one-tenth as attractive as you are!" He punctuated the remark by dropping a sudden kiss on the top of her head.

"We're getting away from the point, Ivor," she said, moving away as though she was afraid of his touch. "We were talking about what we felt for the people we're married to."

He sighed, dropped her hand, and flung himself into a chair.

"Well, we can talk about that for the rest of the night. It's all such a mess."

She knitted her brows.

"Is it? Oh, I didn't want what I felt for Bill to be a mess. Perhaps it is. And perhaps we're both facing the same sort of problem. But let's try not to get muddled."

"My dear," he said gently, "this sort of thing never happens by intent or purpose, and I don't suppose either of us wanted to be faced with an emotional crisis. It's something outside ourselves."

"And something within ourselves."

"And that is of even vaster importance. So let's accept it right away."

"Oh, I don't think I want to!" she cried suddenly. "Can't we go back to where we were at dinner time, and just talk about anything except ourselves."

He shook his head.

"You know that isn't possible."

"Yet it'll be mad to let it develop, Ivor. You could be strong, and just get up and walk out of the room and out of my life."

"Shall I?"

The warm blood stung her cheeks.

"You aren't very fair," she whispered.

"Perhaps that's the shoddy part of my character," he said, and put out a hand and drew her off the hassock and on to his knee, holding her there. "Oh, my sweet, don't be too level-headed. And don't let's dissect things any more. Let's just be amazingly happy."

She was lost again, as she knew she would be, by close contact with him. For a few moments she surrendered weakly

to his kiss, leaning against him, head on his shoulder, face raised to his. She had never felt that warm, vital sensation with Bill. She had known passion with him. But only rarely.

This new delirium which overpowered her reasoning and her morality sprang from the touch of Ivor Bent's hands and lips.

"Lovely, lovely Julia. God, but I love you, darling," said Ivor's voice against her lips.

She turned away and buried her eyes against his shoulder, but with her arms about his neck.

"I think I love you too."

"I know you do."

"What are we going to do?" she asked helplessly.

"Go on loving each other," he said.

But the ecstasy of sitting there in his warm embrace and his caresses which were so sweet and insidious, could not for long destroy her common-sense attitude. That was the worst of it, she thought. If one could be just animal—without morals—without caring who one hurt or what one did—it would be so easy. One could then give way to the purely pagan enjoyment of an episode like this and revel in it. But when one wasn't built that way, and she possessed a spiritual and intellectual side, it wasn't easy. It was hellishly difficult. But for that she supposed she must be thankful. For wasn't that just the divine spark in a man—the Something which raised him from the level of a beast of the earth to a creature of God?

She roused herself, sat up, pushed the hair from her eyes, sighed and looked at Ivor. She hardened her heart. She touched his dark, dishevelled head, kissed him swiftly on the mouth, then despite his protests, got up and moved back to her hassock.

"I'm going to ask for drinks," she said. "We'll both have a strong one and then try to talk sense."

III

When Vi Mackenzie returned from the cinema, soon after eleven, she asked her escort to come in for a drink, because she fully anticipated that Julia and Ivor Bent would still be there, talking.

But she found the drawing-room in darkness and a note from Julia in the hall, saying that she had gone to bed. Somewhat surprised, Vi gave George a very hurried drink, got rid of him, and hurried upstairs to find out exactly what had happened. Her own evening had been a success. The film had proved as exotic and glamorous as Vi's heart could desire, and George had been sweet and held her hand in the approved fashion. She was not so sure, however, about the success of Julia's evening, and felt a slight pang of self-reproach for having gone off and left her guests to amuse themselves.

Julia apparently heard her footsteps, because she called out from her bed : "Is that you, Vi? Come in."

Vi entered the bedroom. Julia was sitting up in bed reading by the light of a table lamp. Vi advanced into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Well, how did you get on?" she asked with some uneasiness. Julia's face was pale and strained. Vi had never seen her look quite like that before.

"Why did our artist retire so early?" she asked without waiting for Julia to answer her first question.

Julia answered :

"Oh he—wanted to get home."

"Did he?"

"No," said Julia under her breath, "he didn't really. But he went."

Vi unloosened her coat and unpinned the orchid which was now bruised and drooping. She said :

"What's happened, Ju? Something has. Tell me."

Julia flung herself back on the pillows and shut her eyes. Her head was aching. It had ached persistently and brutally

ever since Ivor had taken her in his arms and kissed her good night, then left her, an hour ago.

"I wish you'd never left us alone, Vi! Oh, I do wish you hadn't!"

"My dear! What in the name of fortune . . ."

"Oh, I know you meant to be friendly," broke in Julia, "but it's one of the most unfriendly things you've ever done to me, Vi. My God, it is!"

Vi gulped a little, removed her glasses, and screwing up her eyes, peered short-sightedly at the figure in the bed.

"My *dearest*—what *has* happened?"

Julia laced her fingers behind her head and shut her eyes tight.

"He kissed me," she said, "and we both found out that we were insanely in love with each other, that's all."

"And then he went on kissing you, I hope," said Vi.

Julia sat bolt upright again, and gave Vi a fierce look.

"This isn't funny. It isn't at all funny, so for heaven's sake don't be flippant about it."

Vi replaced her glasses and her expression changed.

"Darling, I'm sorry. Do you want me to take you seriously?"

"Quite."

"You mean that you you and Ivor Bent have fallen for each other?"

"Yes. And remembering the fact that he's got a wife and two children, and I've got a husband, it isn't so funny, is it?"

"My dear—not if you're frightfully serious, but——"

"Well I am," broke in Julia, the colour rising to her cheeks and throat. "I am and so is he, and that's the devil of it."

"Darling, I never meant this to happen."

"I thought you did."

It was Vi's turn to flush. She put out a hand and laid it on Julia's.

"You're not going to be cross with me, are you, Ju? You know you're the one person in the world, of my own sex,

whom I most admire and care for. I wouldn't do anything in the world to hurt you."

Julia said :

"Oh, I know, Vi. I know that. And I know you didn't mean anything serious to happen. But it did. That's all. It only shows how dangerous it is to fool around. To talk about it being 'good' for one to come out of one's shell and have a change——"

"Julia, you must tell me about it. Darling, you're beginning to frighten me."

"There's nothing to be frightened of. We didn't go off the deep end altogether, you know."

"I didn't suppose you did—I know you don't do those things."

"I wouldn't have believed it possible when I came up to town this afternoon that I was going to allow another man to kiss me and enjoy it—and want more of it—and more! I'm in love with Ivor—not just temporarily amused. And that's something you wouldn't have imagined either, Vi."

The older woman passed a hand across her forehead in a bewildered way.

"Darling, I just can't think what to say to you. It's all so terribly unexpected."

"It is," said Julia grimly.

"I thought he was attracted to you. I told you so. And I hoped you'd find him interesting. But not to this extent."

"I repeat," said Julia, "that this only shows how dangerous it is to fool around. You may be able to do it with an old boy friend like George. And there isn't any man alive who'd really take your heart away from Mac. But Ivor's taken mine from Bill. That's the awful part of it. And I'm being frank about it."

"Julia," said Vi. "What in the name of fortune am I going to do about this?"

"I've been asking myself that question," said Julia.

"What did he say? I mean, how is it left?"

"In the air," said Julia. "Rather like it began. He made love to me. I responded. He made me feel something that I've never felt for Bill and never could I don't only mean in the physical sense, but in every way. Then we had drinks and talked things over and tried to find some solution to the problem, and reached none. It's just the old business of husbands and wives falling out of love with each other, and into love with somebody else. And I got so tired and muddled I told him he must go home, and he went, that's all."

Vi's plump pink face showed an unusual gravity. She had never meant anything to happen that would make Julia unhappy. That was her first and foremost concern. If things were to be taken as seriously as this, then Julia would be unhappy. Ivor Bent, Vi hardly knew and did not care about. Bill she knew and liked, but he was only of secondary consideration.

"Darling," she said, "are you sure that he is as serious as you are?"

"As sure as one can be of anything, Vi. I haven't known him any time at all and yet I feel that I know him better than I know Bill."

"Well, I agree that Ivor Bent's a most attractive man, and I know how attractive you are, but my dearest Ju—what on earth will happen, if you're going to take it so seriously?"

"Darling, I couldn't take it any other way," said Julia in a gentle voice.

"Well, I suppose not—if it's the real thing."

"Even if it isn't. It may prove to be the reverse. I'm no great believer in lifelong romances. Neither have I any illusions about human nature. It can be the most unreliable, inconsistent, and mischievous thing in the world. But at the moment what Ivor and I feel for each other seems very real to us."

"Well, I always knew Bill wasn't your man."

Julia's face looked white and strained again. She lit a cigarette. Vi noticed that there were already too many ends in that ash-tray. Julia must have been chain-smoking.

Said Julia: "I hardly dare think about Bill. I've been trying not to."

"Darling, it's not your fault if he isn't the right man for you, and if you can't stay in love with him."

"No, but you see, he's still in love with me."

"Well that isn't your fault, either."

"Its nobody's fault, but it's all the devil's own mess!" exclaimed Julia. "I've *got* to keep calm. I can't just allow physical emotion to sway me. Ivor and I have both got to think straight—and, if possible, act straight."

"Oh, dear," said Vi, "I wish this hadn't happened. Why must these affairs always be so unhappy?"

"Because they're illicit, darling."

"I know nothing about Ivor Bent. What did he want to start it all for?"

"Vi darling, he didn't mean to start anything any more than you did when you left us together."

"Then if it's my fault I shall never forgive myself."

Julia pressed her hand.

"That's absurd. It isn't anybody's fault. It's just happened."

"You're not even *thinking* about divorce, are you?"

Julia shut her eyes tightly. The pain in her head seemed to be growing worse.

"No, there isn't any question of divorce. Ivor couldn't possibly leave his family, and couldn't afford to, even if he wished, and I wouldn't desert Bill."

"Oh dear!" said Vi with a sigh.

Julia opened her eyes.

"Darling, I'm too exhausted to talk any more. Say good night, there's a lamb, and we'll talk again to-morrow."

"I couldn't be happy if anything wretched happened to you, Julia. And specially not when I feel, in a measure, responsible."

Julia kissed her.

"Darling, it'll work out. Probably when I see Ivor

to-morrow, it will mean goodbye and we shan't meet again."

But even as she said the words, she knew, just as Viola Mackenzie knew, that saying goodbye couldn't undo anything that had been done, nor put either of them back into the places which they had held before they acknowledged their love for each other.

"It's like cutting off a limb," thought Julia, "and then sticking it back and expecting it to become whole with the body again without any pain or even a scar. Oh, what a thing to have happened!"

Vi kissed her and walked out of the room and shut the door.

Julia tried hard to think clearly now, to-night, before she went to sleep, before she had to face Ivor again. But it was impossible. All was confusion in her mind. She alternated between a fierce desire for Ivor Bent and a sensation of guilt about Bill.

Perhaps the whole thing was just desire for this man who desired her. Perhaps it was just because she was tired of Bill and his kisses. His touch had become a habit, the dull and unsatisfactory love-making that went on between millions of husbands and wives.

But Julia was convinced in her mind that the attraction between herself and Ivor Bent had more than sex desire for its basis. It had mental qualities. She was wildly attracted by his mind, his personality, the touch of genius in him. So like a flame he was, a bright, burning flame.

And he liked her mind. He had said so. They had so much to say to each other, to talk about. They need not be in each other's arms to enjoy each other's society. She could well believe that they might sit at opposite ends of the room and look and talk and know complete spiritual fulfilment.

Ivor had told her a lot to-night about his life with Ursula and the children. She knew now how unhappy he was and how unfulfilled in his personal life. He was unhappier than

she had been. For she could not have said that she was actively miserable with Bill, merely bored. But Ivor was different and disliked his wife. Julia knew now, having discovered her feelings for Ivor, that her life with Bill was incomplete. That was the worst of an 'affair'. It opened one's eyes to too many facts, and made it impossible for one to be satisfied with second best.

She might have gone on being moderately happy with Bill, even though bored, had she not fallen in love with Ivor. But Ivor had said he could never be anything approaching happy with Ursula. He had been married to her a long time, and had fallen out of love with her long ago. And for his children he felt as Julia had imagined he would—affection, but not adoration.

"The poor little devils are all right, and I don't want to hurt them any more than I want to hurt Ursula," he had said.

And he had added that he did not want to hurt her, Julia, either.

Her thoughts went on in a vicious circle, round and round, hour after hour, until love became torture. Until, worn out, she fell asleep, only to wake up early in the morning, and the torture began all over again.

CHAPTER IV

I

JULIA drove her car slowly along the Embankment in the direction of Ivor Bent's flat. He had rung her up at Vi's before eight o'clock this morning, apologising for waking her up, not that it was necessary, because she had been wide awake, and had implored her to come to his studio.

First of all he wanted her to see where he worked, he said, and show her some of his pictures, and secondly he wanted to be alone with her, which would be difficult if they met outside. And he also said that she need not be afraid of running into Ursula, because Ursula had an appointment with the oculist at a quarter-to-eleven. She was taking Ann-Louise to have her glasses altered. The elder girl of course would be at school.

"You must come," Ivor had told Julia urgently. "I shall be horribly disappointed if you don't."

So Julia promised, against her better judgment, to do as he wished. And she tried to whitewash the foolishness by telling herself that it would be not only the first, but the last time that she would visit Ivor in his studio, and probably the last time she would ever see him. She had quite made up her mind that she could not allow this affair to proceed.

It was a grey day and not a particularly warm one. The river was misty. Wharves, depositories, houses and factories all shrouded in that grey sooty gloom, slightly sinister, wholly melancholy that belongs to London.

When at last she left her car outside the door, rang the bell over which there was a notice : *"Please walk up to No. 3 flat"*, and began to mount the tall narrow staircase, Julia felt troubled. It was all very well doing a thing like this, but

supposing Mrs. Bent had taken it into her head not to go to the oculist? Supposing Ivor had rung her up at Vi's just after she left, and couldn't get her? It would be very awkward if she came face to face with Ursula. What could she say, except that she wanted to buy a picture, or something stupid like that.

But those fears were allayed in a very short time, because Ivor himself appeared on the upper landing, leaned over the banisters and greeted her.

"Come up," he said in a hushed voice, "I've been waiting . . ."

Then she was beside him and he was holding both her hands, looking down into her eyes in the manner which she had anticipated and which caught at her heart-strings exactly in the way she had known it would. The thought of his wife receded into the background. She could only say, rather stupidly :

"Well, here I am !"

He kissed both her hands and then dropped them.

"Come up to the studio, Julia."

She followed him. The sound of her own name falling from his lips was very thrilling. And the sight of him was equally so in his grey flannels, dark crimson shirt and tie, and grey woolly pullover. His hands were a little smudged with paint and charcoal. There was that familiar lock of dark hair falling across his forehead. She noticed that and all the little things about him that she had noticed last night, and found exceedingly attractive to her.

At the same time she began to think that she had been more than a fool to come.

Through an open door she caught a glimpse of a bedroom, conspicuously untidy. Ursula's bedroom, no doubt. Julia could see an unmade bed with sheets and blankets trailing on the floor and that gave her a burning sensation of jealousy. Ivor had the right to go to that bed. Even though he had assured her that he no longer "lived with" Ursula

these days, it had not always been so. They had been lovers once. They had been intimate with each other just as she had been with Bill. Julia could not bear the thought.

She was pale and trembling when she reached the studio. She walked in first, then Ivor shut the door after her and stood with his back to it. He was flushed and eager. He gave her a piercing glance and said :

"Oh, Julia ! *Julia,* to see you here, to have you here all to myself !"

She did not speak but drew off her gloves and dived into her bag for a cigarette to steady her nerves. She had only a confused impression of Ivor's studio, of a half-finished poster on the easel, representing some airline company. Of other vivid paintings, of a divan against one wall covered with brown sacking material; and of a sense of height and space and light which she liked.

Then she felt Ivor's hands on her shoulders.

"Don't smoke," he said. "Kiss me."

The cigarette-case dropped back into her bag. She felt hopeless, in the grip of something too potent for her to control. She turned blindly to him and he took her in his arms. She took off her hat and tossed it in the direction of the sofa, then shut her eyes.

But the moment of passion which devastated both of them passed and Julia recovered herself and drew back from him.

"This is quite crazy," she said. "Let me go, please."

But Ivor was more stirred than he had thought it possible to be. Kissing her, touching her, was an elixir which made him feel miraculously young and on the very pinnacle of happiness. He had thought himself negative about women, tired of love and interested in a side of life which was dissociated with sex. But this was something as terrific as it was unexpected. It had come unasked and yet seemed a divine inspiration which he could not, would not banish because of the ordinary ethics of right and wrong.

"Let me hold you, sweet," he said. "Let me keep you close.

You don't know what it means to me. I haven't slept. I've just been thinking of you hour after hour. As soon as it was light, I crept up here, and started to sketch your head as I remember it. I love you. Don't you realise that? I love you—*love you.*"

She was devastated but she managed to argue with him.

"I love you too. But it isn't any use."

"You're wrong. A love like ours couldn't possibly be allowed to vanish into smoke."

"That's what we've got to talk about, Ivor. We've both of us got to keep our heads and attack this thing intelligently."

He let his arms fall away and gave her a smile, half comic, half tragic.

"For the first time I wish you weren't an intelligent woman, Julia. I wish you were just stupid and content to lie in my arms."

"That wouldn't be altogether stupid——" She tried to smile back and found a cigarette and lit it, feeling that it was a life-belt to a drowning man. "But you can see that if we just—make love to each other—we'll never get any further."

He folded his arms and looked at her steadily.

"Well, if you insist on being wise, my sweet, I must try and be wise with you. But I don't want to do anything but go on kissing you. I wonder if you know what marvellous lips you've got. They're quite different from any other woman's, resilient, extraordinarily intoxicating."

Her face was hot and pink. She smoked furiously.

Ivor made her conscious of her body, in a way that no other man in her life had ever done. She liked it and yet it worried her. She said :

"It isn't very wise to tell me things like that."

And she turned from him, and walked to the window, looked out and said unsteadily :

"What a view !"

He followed and stood beside her, looking out at the river.

"Yes, it's a sight that never palls. I'm glad you like it."

She waved her cigarette in the direction of the Power House.

"That ought to give you a feeling of strength!"

He was pleased.

"The Power House is one of my unfailing inspirations. You understand all that it symbolises. You think the way I do."

She gave him a wry smile.

"Not really. I don't begin to have a brain like yours."

"Oh, my brain's futile!" he said, and brushed the hair from his forehead impatiently. "And everything in my life has been futile until now."

"I feel that way too, Ivor, but we can't either of us stay in each other's lives more than these few moments. You know that as well as I do."

"Have you come here to tell me that?"

"Yes."

Silence for an instant. They held each other's gaze. She felt that she had inflicted a mortal wound on herself by what she had said, and was crushed by the pain of it.

Ivor Bent, too, was crushed by those words. He said:

"You can't stand there and say things so cold-bloodedly. If we love each other like this, there must be some way out for us."

"Only two, and neither of them very attractive. I can either be your wife or your mistress, and neither is possible."

He gave her an almost angry look.

"God, how can you be so cool, so practical!"

"Do you think," she said, angry in her turn, "that it's because I'm not as much in love with you as you are with me? Well, you're wrong. I'm every bit as much in love. But what's the use of attacking it from the wrong angle, Ivor? Something tremendous has happened to us, and it calls for a tremendous decision, which can only be made if we keep cool and practical."

"You're quite right," he said, "absolutely right."

That angry, sulky boy's look on his face went to her heart.

She jammed her cigarette on to an ash-tray, walked up to him and kissed him swiftly on the mouth.

"I'm desperately in love with you, Ivor," she said, "and I don't suppose it would take long for you to break down any defences I put up, but don't try, darling. Help me to be sensible—please."

He did not return the kiss, but she saw his eyes close. He thrust both hands in his pockets and began to pace restlessly up and down the studio, talking as he did so; punctuating the sentences with little darting glances at her. He said :

"You told me just now that there are only two alternatives —either that you become my mistress or my wife. You know that I wouldn't choose the former, by preference, for you. You also know that I'd give years of my life to be free so that I could marry you. But even if I quit Ursula and the kids, I wouldn't have sufficient to offer you. By the time I'd paid out enough money to keep *them*, I'd have little left, and I'd hate to ask any woman I loved to share a back attic with me. In any case I don't hold with the starving lovers theory, I'm material enough to realise that anything sordid can spoil romance. Added to which, I don't for a moment believe that Ursula would divorce me if I asked her. She doesn't believe in divorce where there are children, and I suppose I don't either, if it comes to that."

He broke off and added under his breath :

"Oh, *hell*!"

Julia seated herself on the divan, rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward, thinking.

Ivor stopped his restive pacing and came up to her, looking down at the bent brown head which haunted his imagination so persistently.

"What's in your mind, Julia?"

She looked up at him.

"A lot of things. Mainly I agree with every word you've said, but I am inconsistent enough to hate hearing you say them."

"It isn't fair of life to play such rotten tricks on us," he said. "Why couldn't we have met before either of us married?"

"I wonder how many lovers have said that?"

"Thousands. It's rather a pet trick of Fate's—marrying us off in our youth to the wrong people and introducing us at a later date to the right ones!"

"I wonder if we're so right for each other—you and I!"

"You don't doubt that, do you?" he said indignantly.

"I don't know, Ivor. We're in love—we can neither of us dispute that fact—but whether, if we married, the marriage would turn out any more successfully than our present ones—is, I think, debatable."

"But, Julia darling, we've everything in common."

"It seems so."

"We were drawn towards each other like—like magnets. It was irresistible."

"Yes. And I dare say that there is a big chance of us being happy together, Ivor. But we can't be sure. We don't know each other very well and we might discover all sorts of things that we didn't like."

"My sweet," he said, "that really is so delightfully practical that I can hardly bear it."

"I've got a horrible way of analysing things, Ivor."

"So have I, as a rule, but you're driven it all out of my mind. What's the use of life? All the effort and pain and self-sacrifice leading to old age and then the grave, and then we'll realise, as we're dying, that we've achieved nothing—nothing really worth while!"

"Oh darling!" said Julia in dismay. "How terribly Russian! And how frightfully depressing."

"Isn't the whole of this existence depressing!" he exclaimed.

"No, I don't think that. I don't want to think it."

He made an impassioned gesture.

"It's no use blinding ourselves to facts, Julia. To be married to the wrong person and live on wanting somebody else, trying to forget, and amusing oneself as best one can, just getting

through the days, is a form of self-destruction. We were meant to be happy and fulfilled — meant for purposes creative rather than destructive. We know that death is the inevitable end, but surely we needn't suffer it before it comes and make a long-drawn-out death of our lives!"

Julia stared at him blankly. Nobody had ever talked to her like that before. It seemed to her frightening and a little theatrical, but she reminded herself that Ivor Bent was an artist and was perhaps licensed to speak and think a little more oddly than average human beings. People like her father, for instance, and the brothers with whom she had been brought up, and who had lived an out-of-door existence, primarily in the saddle. They had little to discuss except horses and food. Or like Bill, solid and unimaginative! He never bothered to consider what life was doing to him or what he wanted to do with life. He just lived placidly, taking what came along, and accepting it with the good-natured tolerance which knew no uneasiness and suffered no acute mental distress.

She could see that Ivor was tortured, and that he needed her love and her help. Yet she was helpless to give him either. And neither could she honestly say that her life with Bill had seemed destructive or purposeless. Merely devoid of passion such as this. Now that she was being made to think, it frightened her. She felt that she had been asleep. This man, this ardent, impassioned lover, had wakened more than bodily desire in her. He had roused her powers of thought. She could never be the same after this, never feel the same complacency. And equally was she conscious that forces like these between herself and Ivor Bent could be the reverse of life-giving unless they were properly directed. They could be wholly annihilating. She sat there listening to Ivor, looking at him, torn between her love and her fear.

II

Ursula Bent got off the bus, lifted Ann-Louise down from the step, and walked with her up to the house. Ursula's face

was cross and her lips a thin line of self-disgust. Fool that she had been to forget the cheque that Ivor had given her this morning for Ann-Louise. Two guineas to buy new woollies and slippers. Ursula had meant to put the cheque straight into her bag, but not having the bag at hand, she had instead laid the slip on her dressing-table. There it had remained. She had got as far as Oxford Street, when she remembered it and had to come all the way back.

Ann-Louise, in a good temper for once, pointed at the Jaguar outside the front door and said :

"Pwetty. 'Ook, Mummy . . . pwetty mo-mo-car."

Ursula looked indifferently. Cars held no particular interest for her.

With Anne-Louise's small gloved hand in hers, she climbed the stairs. The mother walked wearily, with a nagging little pain in her back, and the child jumped every now and then, making little stamping sounds with her small feet. She had a new pair of shoes with crêpe-rubber soles, and she wanted there to be a little more noise.

Ursula opened the door with her latchkey. Leaving Ann-Louise in the hall, she hurried to her bedroom, found the cheque, stuffed it in her bag, and was about to leave the flat again when Mrs. Rogers came out of the kitchen.

"I forgot to ask if you wanted a second vegetable for lunch," she said.

"Yes," said Ursula, "I think we'd better have some cabbage."

Mrs. Rogers tossed her head in the direction of the studio. "Mr. Bent has company."

Ursula glanced upwards.

"Has he? Who, Mrs. Rogers?"

"A person. Never seen her before," was the laconic answer.

Ursula pondered a moment. Then she came to the conclusion that the visitor might be her cousin, Betty Porteous, who had written a week ago to say that she was back from Ceylon and would call on her as soon as she could.

Ursula opened the studio door.

She looked guardedly into the room, wondering if she would see her cousin, but not wanting to disturb Ivor if he had a business friend. Then her heart gave a horrid jolt. Ivor was there, his back turned to her, and he had his arms around a woman. A woman whose russet brown head was just discernible to Ursula over Ivor's shoulder. The two were locked in a passionate embrace which left no doubt in Ursula's mind as to their relationship.

For a moment hers was the blind fury of a wife who has been betrayed—of a woman whose love and fidelity have been flung back at her brutally, unwanted, unrewarded. Her first impulse was to rush into the room, tear the unknown woman out of Ivor's arms and say :

"Keep off—keep your hands off my husband. He's mine. He's the father of my children. I'm never going to let him go!"

But as the blood surged back into Ursula's pale cheeks, then ebbed, leaving her sick and shaken, the fury was replaced by pride, and pride by caution. She wasn't going to let that woman know that she had seen. And Ivor she could tackle afterwards. Before this other woman she wasn't going to put herself in the humiliating position of "the wife who had found out". Besides, she did not suppose that it was serious. It was just a nasty little affair on Ivor's part. If she was careful and clever, it would blow over. She mustn't lose him. *She wasn't going to lose him.*

With the light of a soldier in her eyes, Ursula marched into the battlefield. And possibly it was the most courageous thing she had ever done, when she called her husband's name before entering the studio, knowing that it would drive that pair apart.

"Oh, Ivor!" she sang out.

Then walked into the studio, and with nothing whatsoever in her demeanour to betray what she was feeling, faced those two who a moment ago had been in such close

physical contact. Ivor, a trifle red, straightened his tie. He said :

"Oh, hullo, dear. You back?"

"I forgot the cheque you gave me and came back for it," said Ursula, then turned to the visitor.

Ivor said :

"May I introduce Mrs. Daunt—you remember I told you that I met her the other night, Ursula. She's very interested in my paintings. I asked her to come and see some of them. Er—Mrs. Daunt—my wife."

Ursula drove herself to hold out a hand to Ivor's "friend". She had never seen her before. In woman's way, Ursula summed her up. Attractive . . . chic and slim . . . with a lovely red mouth.

Julia, mistress of herself, shook hands quite coolly and said :

"How do you do?"

But inwardly she was perturbed by this sudden and unexpected meeting with Ivor's wife. She felt tongue-tied and horribly guilty. A sensation foreign to her and unpleasant. But she might have known this would happen. It had been foolish of her to come here. And oh, heavens ! could this really be Mrs. Ivor Bent, this dull-looking, badly-dressed, red-haired woman, who had nothing to commend her but a certain sweetness in her blue, tired-looking eyes?

Simultaneously came an understanding of Ivor's discontent. How could this Ursula be a fitting mate for the handsome, charming painter. He was still so young for his years, and looked much younger than his wife.

Their marriage must, indeed, have been a mistake—a worse mistake than hers with Bill.

But she had been his wife for eleven years and was the mother of his two children. Those ties, those habits, were chains strongly forged and more difficult to break than the silken thread of a mere physical attraction.

Ursula was attempting to be hospitable.

"Wouldn't you like a cup of coffee or something, Mrs. Daunt? I'll ask Mrs. Rogers to bring you up one. I'd stay and talk, but I've got to rush to the oculist with my little girl."

Ivor stood by, silent, fuming. Julia stammered that she didn't want any coffee, and was just about to leave.

"Well, I hope to meet you again, and please don't think me discourteous for rushing off like this," said Ursula.

Julia thought :

"She is very nice and obviously kind and stupid. And she oughtn't to be apologising to me for anything. I ought to apologise to her for kissing her husband."

Ivor started to show off a little. He had never in his life been more displeased to see his wife, but he conquered the inclination to say : "For God's sake get out and leave us alone," and, instead, said in his nicest way :

"What a rotten business having to come all the way back for the cheque, my dear. Won't you be late for your appointment?"

"Very," she said. "I'd better fly."

"Take a taxi," said Ivor generously. "Got any change? I have . . ." He put a hand in his pocket and drew out five shillings.

Ursula took it and thought :

"She must have bought a picture or something. He's in such a good humour."

And Julia thought :

"He's so nice to her. It's awful of me, but I wish—I wish more than anything in the world, that I were in her shoes."

A piercing cry sounded from downstairs and sent Ursula hastening to the door.

"That's my naughty child. I must fly. Children are frightfully difficult. Have you got any, Mrs. Daunt?"

"No," said Julia.

Ivor gave her a sidelong glance. He was savagely, egotistically glad that she hadn't borne a child to that other man. If only Julia had been his, they might have had a boy, straight and slim and with that entrancing head of hers.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Daunt," said Ursula, and to Ivor: "See you later, darling."

That pierced Julia to the heart. That dowdy, red-headed, untidy woman, she would see him later, she would see him *always*. She had a right to call him "darling", and to be with him for the rest of his life. It was almost more than Julia could bear. She flung her half-smoked cigarette behind the gas fire and thrust both hands into her coat pockets clenching them, trying to control herself.

Ivor did not move or speak until the sound of his wife's footsteps had died away on the staircase, and his little daughter's sobbing abruptly ceased. Then, in a low voice, he said:

"That was damned unfortunate."

"I don't see that it matters," said Julia in a lifeless way.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, what does it matter whether she found us here together or not? She won't find us together again."

He came close to her.

"You can't say that to me, you *can't*."

White and tense, she answered:

"I can. Seeing her has made me realise what little right I've got to your love, Ivor."

"Julia, I won't admit it. The very sight of Ursula in the same room with yourself has made me sure that she could never make me happy as you do."

"That may be true. But you're married to her and you can't leave her or the children. You've said so."

"If that's the only way I can get you——"

"It isn't," she broke in. "I wouldn't allow you to leave them for me even if you decided you could do so. We might both do any mad thing, but we'd regret it horribly afterwards. Oh, Ivor. We can't go through this argument again. We've gone round and round it. And before *she* came we'd reached the conclusion—or at least I had that we'd better not meet any more."

He caught her by the shoulders, hurting her.

"I can't let you go. Our love is something real and we'd be crazy not to accept it."

"Crazier still if we did," she said with a set little smile.

"Julia, don't leave me."

That cry reached the depths of her. She said under her breath :

"Oh, Ivor, my darling, I don't want to. You must know how much I'd like to give in and say I'll live with you as your mistress or anything, but it's impossible. We'd end up by despising ourselves, and, perhaps, each other."

"Not if we really love."

"How do we know? And anyhow, we've got to do the decent thing."

His hands fell away from her. His eyes looked very black and his face white. He had never seemed more attractive, nor had she wanted more poignantly to put her arms around his neck and tell him that she didn't care a straw about his wife or her husband, and that she would go to him and let everything else fly to the winds.

Then Ivor said :

"Well, if you think it's best for us to say goodbye."

"I *know* it is."

"All right. I've got to accept it."

"Oh, my darling!" Julia said. "If you knew how weak I really am."

She found herself back in his arms and they kissed with a passion that sent the fever coursing through her blood again, kissed until reason and honour were almost driven from her head, and only by a super effort, she managed to draw from him, turn to the sofa, and blindly grope for her hat and gloves and fur-lined coat.

Ivor Bent watched with something like panic in his eyes.

"You aren't really going?"

"Yes," said Julia, "as quickly as I can!"

He drew in his breath, fighting with himself. Nothing as

tempestuous as this had ever come his way. And he had known the love of many women –lovely and attractive women—before he married Ursula. But Julia with her frank, direct nature, the clean slim lines of her, was a torment and a temptation more potent than all the rest put together. He felt angry and cheated and worse than all powerless to keep her. He said :

"You'll go back to your husband. Back to-night. *He'll* have the right to take you in his arms and oh, God !"

There was not a vestige of colour in Julia's face as she put on her hat and gloves. Those last words of Ivor's conjured up something that she could not bear to contemplate.

"Oh, darling, *don't* !" she said in a suffocated voice. "I'm going. Goodbye."

"We're not to see each other—or even write?"

"What's the use? It's much better to cut it right out."

He turned from her.

"You're cruelly philosophical."

"I'm not ! I'm not !" she said furiously. "Oh, *please* say goodbye to me !"

"Goodbye."

She looked at his back, conscious that his pain and his sense of frustration were equal to her own, yet somehow the man, the artist, had a side weaker than hers. She felt no contempt for it, only compassion. She said :

"I'll never forget you."

He swung round.

"We're saying goodbye to heaven, Julia."

"And thereby avoiding hell."

"Isn't this hell enough?"

She ignored that and thrust out a hand.

"I'd like something you painted. Just to hang in my room. Will you give me that?"

"So that you can look at it with your husband?"

She flinched and her hand dropped. With immediate compunction he caught it up again and carried it to his lips.

"Forgive me. But I'm half off my head at the thought of losing you."

"Oh, darling," she said, and the tears gathered in her eyes. Difficult tears. Julia was not a woman who often cried.

"If you find things too hard, Julia, come to me, swear. Swear you'll come, if only for an hour."

"Yes."

"You shall have your picture. I'll paint you a masterpiece."

"Thank you."

"To save me going out of my mind, may I get in touch with you to-morrow—just to hear you tell me everything's all right with you. I'm not as brutally self-centred as I seem. I do worry about you, and I know it will be hard for you. Let me ring you up to-morrow night, please!"

"The thin end of the wedge, Ivor."

"Don't be too strong. Just grant me that."

"Very well."

Out of the welter of his despair, a light glimmered.

"Thank you, darling. Thank you."

Then she tore her hand away and walked quietly out of the studio. She went down the long, dark flight of stairs, opened the front door, and moved out into the light. Somehow or other she managed to take her place at the wheel and start up the car, wondering if she had ever been so abysmally unhappy in her life. And as she went, she suddenly, irrelevantly remembered that this was the 1st of April, and she thought:

"April's Fool Day! And I've made a fool of myself. Oh, Ivor, Ivor——!"

And there was Bill waiting for her down at "Katherine's". Bill—and the rest of it!

Lunch in Ivor Bent's flat was a gloomy affair. Ursula came back from shopping, still in a fighting mood. But she let the meal go through without saying a word to her husband. He made no particular attempt at conversation, occupied with his own thoughts. If Ursula was unusually silent, he did not

even notice it. The only times either of them spoke was to tell their daughter, Flip, to eat her vegetables and stop fidgeting, and to admonish Ann-Louise for spilling the gravy.

After the meal, Ivor rose and slouched to the door.

"I'm going out," he said shortly.

He felt that he must get out and walk. He couldn't bear the flat, the family, anything about them. He wanted to be alone, to think of Julia.

But Ursula was ready for him.

"I'd like a word with you before you go, Ivor."

"If it's money you want——"

"It isn't," she broke in.

He shrugged his shoulders, lit a cigarette, and followed her to the bedroom. Ursula shut the door and put her back against it.

"How long have you known that woman, Ivor?' she asked.

He looked sharply at her.

"What woman?"

"The only one that matters, I should imagine," she said, and added with sarcasm, "at the moment, anyhow."

"What the hell——"

"I saw you kissing Mrs. Daunt." Ursula blurted out the words without beating about the bush.

She saw the colour that crept up under Ivor's skin and the guilt in his eyes. That hurt her. She loathed the idea that the man she had worshipped for years should stand before her in that miserable state of "being found out".

He said :

"I see. Well, why didn't you say so sooner?"

"Because I did not wish to humiliate myself in front of *her* —that's why."

Ivor turned away and looked out at grey skies and sooty chimney-tops. His head ached. His nerves were jangling. God! if there was going to be a scene, he thought, he couldn't stand it. He would shout at Ursula and run out of the flat.

He tried desperately to avoid the abuse which he felt was awaiting him.

"Listen, Ursula—don't be a fool. There's nothing in it. I kissed her—I lost my head for a minute. She's damned attractive. But you needn't behave as though you'd found us in *flagrante delicto.*"

Ursula winced.

"You needn't be coarse."

"I'm not. I'm stating a fact. You saw me kissing the girl. There it is. And that's all there is to it."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I expect nothing. It's what *you* want to believe."

Faint perplexity came into Ursula's tired eyes. She looked pathetic—half furious with him—half anxious to please him, in spite of it. She said:

"Naturally I don't want to think——"

"Then don't think it!" he snapped, swinging round to her. "I own I oughtn't to have kissed her. It was rotten of me. I'm sorry, Ursula. But for God's sake don't nag at me. I'm not feeling terribly fit."

Her anxiety increased, a maternal solicitude such as she felt for the children, submerging outraged dignity, wifely rights. She said:

"Oh, Ivor, you haven't caught another cold, have you?"

The pathos of her, combined with a certain simplicity which had always been hers, moved him to some real contrition, although he was irritated.

"No—heavens no! It's just my nerves."

"Where did you meet that woman?"

"You know. At the Robinsons."

"How often have you seen her?"

He set his teeth. The cross examination was coming. He couldn't avoid it. He tried to answer all her questions without snarling, telling her to go to hell and leave him alone.

"Hardly at all . . . yes, it's the first time she's been here . . . no, I'm not in love with her. . . ." He told that lie without a

tremor . . . "Of course it's only a momentary business. You know what men are . . . make some allowances. Call it animal instinct or any damn thing you like, but don't get silly ideas in your head . . ."

On and on until his head was bursting and hers was whirling as she tried to find out things that he refused to say, and endeavoured to believe what he did say. It ended, as he had known it would end : in a complete breakdown from Ursula. Lying on the bed, sobbing. Saying :

"I never thought you'd do a thing like that. I hate that woman. I loathe her ! I daresay she *is* attractive. She's younger than I am. She hasn't had children. She's kept her figure. And she's probably got more money to spend on her clothes. What she spends on having her hair done and her nails manicured, I daresay I save to buy things for the children. It isn't fair."

Reproaches, grievances, hiccoughing sobs.

Somehow he managed to keep his control, sit on the bed and comfort Ursula.

"I swear I won't see her any more. Don't worry yourself, Ursula. Forget it—give a fellow a chance and don't be such a damned prude," he said as kindly as he could.

So finally, because the children were screaming outside for "Mummy", and because Ivor was contrite, Ursula pulled herself together and stopped crying. She raised a blotched, wet face for Ivor to kiss. He forced himself to kiss it. For a moment he held her in his arms. Some of her battered pride and love were restored to her.

"I won't think about it any more if you promise not to see her," she whispered, snuffling, blowing her nose. "Of course I know it's different for men. But I'd think I'd committed a crime if I kissed anybody but you, Ivor. But we'll forget about it, darling."

He thanked her and even asked if she'd like to go out with him. She said that she wouldn't because she knew that she looked "frightful". He went out alone, raw and savage,

wondering how he was going to stand the days and nights until he could speak to Julia again.

III

Julia drove her car straight into the garage behind "Katherine's", switched off the engine and for a moment sat still. So very still it seemed, once the chuffing of the engine and the swish-swish of the windscreen wiper ceased.

Inside the garage it was dark and cold and singularly depressing, Julia thought, as most garages are. Cold cement and patches of oil and cobwebs on the window, odd petrol tins and coils of hose, looking like ugly, slimy pythons curled into sinister circles.

The drive from town had been unattractive. It had poured all the way. Julia's eyes felt tired, strained from peering so incessantly through the rain.

She would have given anything not to have had to return to "Katherine's" to-day. But she couldn't avoid it. It would have seemed queer for her to stay another night with Vi, since Mac was coming back and Vi would have felt more or less compelled to ask Bill to join them. That would have meant a "gay party". Julia couldn't have coped with it. Yet now that she was here she felt equally unable to cope with things.

What a morning! Would she ever forget it?

She had been strong with Ivor, and now all her strength was spent, and she felt hideously weak. In a dim, perverse fashion, too, she was half wishful that she had not been so strong; that she could have been capable of that pagan, sensational enjoyment which knows little sense of guilt, and does not recognise loyalties.

But it was all over. They had said goodbye. And now for Bill!

Julia pulled herself together and got out of the car.

Bill made his appearance. He wore an old dilapidated coat and was soaked but cheerful. His fair hair was bright and curling from the rain.

He greeted her effusively.

"Hel-*lo*? How are you, darling? You must have had a foul drive. Here—I'll take your suitcase."

He took her suitcase which she had lifted out of the car, then leaned down to her. She knew that she was expected to kiss him, and did so, on the cheek. She wondered if he would notice at once that something was amiss with her and prayed that he would not.

But this was where Bill Daunt scored by a lack of imagination. He just saw that Julia was back again, and felt it was good to have her home. He rubbed his cheek against hers and sniffed that well-known fragrance of her hair and her clothes.

He walked in front of her, chatting.

"I'd have brought out an umbrella for you if I'd thought of it. It's coming down in torrents. What a foul spring! Didn't I learn some poem in my youth about 'Oh to be in England now that April's there?' I say, Ju, I want you to see the goldfish pond now it's finished. Orchard did all the pointing on the crazy paving this morning, and it's grand. How did you get on at Vi's? Come and tell me all about it."

He dropped the suitcase in the hall, and stamped his muddy garden boots on the coco-matting. He grinned at his wife cheerfully.

"I'll take off these clod-hoppers, and then we'll have some tea. Snoopy and Jealous are in the kennel, getting themselves dry."

"How kind," said Julia in a desolate little voice, took off her own wet coat and hat, flung them over a chair, and with hands in her pockets, walked into the drawing-room.

She walked across the long, lovely room to the big open fireplace and mechanically kicked a log into position against one of the wrought-iron dogs. As she did so, she found herself wondering what Ivor was doing at this very moment. Probably he was with his wife. Or perhaps he was still painting. She preferred to think of him alone up in the studio with his art.

And when she remembered that she had given him permission to telephone her to-morrow night, her heart seemed to knock against her very ribs.

Everywhere in the room there were spring flowers, defying the rain and the wind and the unseasonable cold. Everywhere was warmth and beauty and that atmosphere of serene grace which only a very old house can produce.

She dropped her head in her hands and sat dumb, struggling with herself, shielding the warmth of the fire from her face.

In came Bill, rubbing his hands.

"Here we are! The fire looks good. Are you perished, darling?"

He came up behind her and dropped a kiss on her head.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

He lit the cigarette for her and their fingers touched. She felt an inner revulsion but her face remained immovable. She stared into the fire and smoked while Bill talked to her. He had a lot to say about the work he had put into the garden this morning, about Orchard's touch of lumbago, which, if it didn't get better, he thought, would end in the poor old chap having to go to bed for a day or two.

He noticed suddenly that Julia was uncommunicative and that her face was a trifle pale and downcast.

"Aren't you feeling too good, darling?"

Immediately she flushed bright red, and said, sharply:

"Perfectly."

"What did you do last night?"

She had known the question would come and that she must answer. She clasped her hands in her lap very tightly, so that the points of her nails hurt the palms.

"We didn't do much old George Hargreaves came in. Vi gave us the usual good dinner. . . . Yes, there was another man . . . who? . . . oh, a Mr. Ivor Bent. He paints posters."

She had to force herself to speak that name. It sounded queer and out of place in this room.

"And what did you do this morning?"

Julia's lips curved almost ironically. What did she do? Only hurt herself and her lover by being strong-minded and by doing the right thing. Hurt herself and him, mortally. The thought of their last kiss was like death to her. She felt that she was dying a little through the whole thought of Ivor, dying by slow stages, and she could only pray that it would hurry up and kill her so that there would be an end to it.

She heard herself say :

"Not much. Some shopping."

"Buy anything nice?" asked Bill. "You didn't bring any parcels down."

She had not bought anything. She thought :

"It's so easy to be tripped up, and for little lies like that to get one into a mess."

"I'm glad you had a good time, darling," said Bill, although he wasn't quite sure at the back of his mind if she really had enjoyed herself. She didn't look much like it, he told himself.

He said :

"I missed you last night. Do you know it's the first time I've slept in a room by myself since we were married? It seemed darned lonely."

"Yes," she said, and remained at a loss for further words. But the thought of that room upstairs with the two beds side by side made her heart sink.

Now came the expected tangible proof of Bill's affection and pleasure at seeing her again. He came up behind her, leaned down and put both arms about her, cupping her slight breasts with his big, muscular hands.

"Lovely to get you back, sweetheart."

She sat tense, shutting her eyes, nerving herself for the first of what must be a good many ordeals of the kind. It was right, and it was legal, it was just, that he should touch her and think of her as his possession. He was being lover-like in his welcome, showing her that he had missed her and that her absence had made him all the more loving. But everything

in her screamed against it. Yes, she could have screamed aloud and said :

"Don't touch me! *Don't!* Get away from me! I'm not yours. I'm *his.* Only he has a right to make love to me. Oh, get out!"

But she said and did nothing. Only when he kissed her on the mouth, she felt as though she was being tortured. The arrival of the Alsatians fortunately ended the torture. They bounded into the room, so that she could be excused for drawing out of Bill's arms and greeting them.

Both the big graceful dogs leapt upon her, and she made a great fuss of them while they fawned upon her and tried to lick her cheeks and hands. She was glad of that opportunity to laugh and talk and call them familiar pet names a little hysterically, perhaps to hide her confusion and her misery.

Bill sat back in his chair, pulled a pipe out of his pocket, and regarded the scene with his customary good humour.

But she thought :

"I can't bear it. *I don't know how I'm going to bear it!*"

IV

It was a wonder to Julia that she managed to appear normal for the rest of that day. And Bill's cheerfulness and quiet satisfaction became, in a measure, irritants. Somehow his blissful complacency was annoying, and bred in her something akin to resentment.

The very fact that Bill was her husband had a destructive effect upon her hitherto kindly and affectionate feelings towards him. Although unconscious of it, he assumed the aspect of an enemy rather than a friend. An infuriatingly solid barrier between her and her lover. All through the evening she found herself becoming more and more hostile towards him.

Her brain would keep revolving round and round the memory of Ivor, each hour intensifying her need for him, and that perverse regret that she had bidden him goodbye.

In the serene lamplit drawing-room of "Katherine's" with

the log fire crackling in the open grate, there was every resemblance of peace and happiness. They had had a good dinner. And Bill opened a bottle of hock to celebrate Julia's return. In fact he was making matters worse by this attempt to celebrate, making it obvious that her one night away had seemed a week to him, wishing her to see how glad he was to get her back.

But in the heart of Julia there was no peace, only a raw, almost savage pain and the persistent desire for her lover.

She looked broodingly, resentfully, through her lashes at the big, happy man who sat opposite her. And she did not see how she could ever want to belong to him again in the physical sense.

Was she a fool to have told Ivor that she could not stand a furtive intrigue and would not become his mistress?

As the evening wore on, Julia reached breaking-point. But Bill, in glorious oblivion, was at the top of his form. He did the crossword puzzle which he never missed, while he drank his coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then he switched on the TV. He liked that. Four nights out of the week they were out. They were popular in the neighbourhood because they played good bridge and they had friends both in Lewes and in Brighton, which was no way in a fast car.

Perhaps never before had Julia realised what a creature of habit her husband was; how little he liked to divert from his usual course. He was perfectly happy doing the same thing with her time and time again. But Ivor wouldn't be like Bill. Ivor was as fond of change as she was, as quick, if not quicker, in thought, in action. She could imagine the sort of time they would have together, gay, full, exciting. The variety of recreations they would share. The lovely things they'd do, always with that heavenly intoxication ready to leap between them at a look, at a touch. That was *living*. And she hadn't known it before she met Ivor Bent.

By half-past nine Julia was feeling so ill and tired that it gave her a genuine excuse for preventing Bill from suggesting

the final celebration. *That* she could not and would not go through. Not to-night, anyhow.

She got up suddenly with a hand to her head and said :

"I think I'll go to bed. I've got the most crashing headache."

Bill turned down the TV and looked up at her, his blue mild eyes full of concern.

"I'm frightfully sorry, darling. Take an Aspro."

"I'm going to," said Julia grimly.

"I should think ten grains."

She was so rarely ill that it was a surprise to him. He drew closer to her and noticed that there were shadows under her eyes like bruises and that the rouge stood out, rather startlingly, on her cheek-bones.

"I say, darling," he said, "you haven't caught 'flu or anything up in town, have you?"

She laughed and bent down to pat Jealous, who wagged his tail, thumping it on the floor.

"I—no, I don't think so."

"Did you get cold driving down?"

"No. It's only my head."

He put an arm round her shoulder and gave her a friendly little hug. She was ashamed of herself because she hated him to touch her, and in order to salve her conscience, leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. It was the second time to-day she had kissed his cheek and not his mouth. She wondered if he would notice that. But he didn't. He dropped a kiss on her hair and said :

"It's a bit early, but I'll be up in a moment. I'll just let the animals out and smoke one cigarette."

Julia looked blindly past him and felt her heart thudding, felt sick. Then, in a strained voice, she said :

"I think I'll say good night now, darling, so that you don't disturb me. My head's so frightful, I'll try to get straight to sleep."

If he was disappointed he did not say so, and it did not

enter his head to be aggrieved, because if she wasn't feeling up to the mark, of course she must go straight to sleep. So he drew her close, and smoothed her hair back from her forehead.

"Poor little Ju. Sorry you don't feel fit, darling."

She suffered the embrace with the blind look still in her eyes and her lips stretched in a smile which she felt must look more like a grimace.

"I'll be all right in the morning."

But that wasn't true, she thought. She wouldn't be any better than she was to-night. It would just be a question of getting through the day until Ivor rang her up. That was a grim prospect. And getting through all the other days when he didn't ring her up. And she couldn't go on having headaches and swallowing Aspros and keeping Bill at arm's length, either.

If only he would not kiss her like a lover, to-night! But he insisted upon doing so. Why shouldn't he? He always did, and to-night was no exception and there was no reason in his mind to suppose that she would prefer him to give her a chaste salute on the forehead. He hugged and petted her, murmuring endearments in his nice kind way, telling her how grand it was to have her back and what a jolly evening it had been.

"There's nobody in the world like you, Ju," he finished with that little half-embarrassed laugh with which Bill sometimes punctuated his compliments.

He only kept her in his arms a moment or two, but it seemed to her like an eternity and that she suffered as no other woman in the world could suffer. It was frightful, she thought, to what extent one's nervous system could be tried. Bill's attitude was more than trying. It was the last straw at the end of a terrible day. She ought to be grateful for his sweetness to her. She *was* —but she didn't want it to-night. Oh, why couldn't he leave her alone and stop making her feel mean and beastly and despicable! She would hate him in a moment.

Somehow she managed to get away with a final: "Good night darling," which had a theatrical ring to it. Then she

rushed upstairs and into her room and shut the door. She wished she could have locked the door. She wanted so badly to be alone. It was difficult enough to have to share everything with Bill downstairs, but feeling as she did now about Ivor, it would have made things so much easier could she have had her own room, and some privacy.

Her bedroom looked as charming and attractive as ever with the shiny peach-coloured chintzes drawn across the windows, and the two electric candles on her dressing-table, making little pools of light on the plate-glass top, lighting up the mirror and the gold-stoppered bottles and china pots and powder bowls, and all her personal things which Alice had unpacked.

Across her bed lay silk pyjamas and her dressing-gown, and there would be a hot-water bottle in her bed and the electric fire had been turned on, so that the room was warm and cosy and the cold, wet April night held no terrors for her.

Yet she hated everything that she saw, and most of all herself. She looked at that other bed, at Bill's blue pyjamas and his Jaeger dressing-gown, as though they were the belongings of a stranger who had no right in her room. She felt almost degraded by the knowledge that soon he would come in here, occupy that bed and force her to accept his presence. Unconscious force, silence force, of course. He wouldn't know how much she hated him to be in here and how intensely she wanted to be alone. He could not know that he was making her pain and her grief all the worse, making the whole situation more difficult for her, because she had to act a part, because she could not even lie here and weep to relieve her feelings. That was a wretched thing; that she dared not give way to tears because he would at once suspect that something was wrong and want an explanation, and she could give none. She was not the type to cry just because she had a pain in her head.

"I," said Julia to herself as she undressed rapidly, "may be a bad woman because I don't love my husband any more,

and am in love with another man. But I can feel that I'm being punished for my badness, all right. Only so far as I can see it isn't going to be a fair do—the punishment is going to last much longer than the crime, if it *is* a crime."

She hoped for Ivor's sake that he wasn't feeling quite as excruciatingly miserable as she was to-night. Probably he was not. Men on the whole did not give love quite so much thought as women did, nor allow it to play quite so big a part in their lives. She fancied that there was enough of the feminine in Ivor's make-up to render him more sensitive to an emotional storm of this kind than many men. But he had the advantage of *being* a man. He could call the tune which Ursula must play, and it wasn't so easy for a woman to do that with her husband. Anyhow, by now Ursula had, Julia supposed, accepted the fact that her husband was no longer in love with her. They had separate rooms. She had her children to occupy her and no doubt she left Ivor alone a good deal. But Bill imagined that his wife was still as much interested in him as he was in her. It would never enter his head to leave her alone. That was the appalling part of it.

Julia stood in front of her dressing-table, combing her hair, her suffering eyes looking back at her from the mirror.

She thought she heard footsteps and in a sudden frenzy of fear that Bill should find her awake, threw down her comb, and got into bed. Then she switched off the lamp beside her, hunched the clothes over her head and pretended to be asleep.

In the darkness, under the bedclothes, she struggled for self-possession, but nothing could prevent the tears from coming into her eyes and rolling hotly, furiously, down her cheeks.

CHAPTER V

I

THE second day of April was to Julia almost as bad as the first. She woke with a splitting headache, stayed in bed for breakfast, and was miserably conscience-stricken because Bill was so attentive. He insisted upon bringing up her breakfast, and was quite concerned because she wouldn't eat. He had never known Julia to be like this before, and never before seen her with such a white face, and a look of strain. He was worried in spite of her efforts to laugh and talk.

"You do look rotten, darling," he said. "Are you getting 'flu, do you think? Oughtn't you to see the doctor?"

Julia shook her head at him. She just felt tired, tired and out of countenance with the whole world, and most of all she desired to be left alone. Alone so that she could think about Ivor. On the other hand she knew that would be just giving way disgracefully. And if she had read about herself in a book she would have called the woman a "sloppy fool". Well, that was what she felt like, and there was poor old Bill sitting on the edge of the bed, all worried and solicitous, imagining that she was sickening for 'flu. If only it had been so, instead of Ivor Bent!

"I'm not ill at all," she tried to reassure her husband. "I'm merely exhausted."

He gave her one of his comic, boyish grins.

"I'd like to know what you were up to in Town to get so tired. Didn't you and Vi go to bed at all?"

Julia riveted her attention on a piece of toast which Bill had carefully buttered for her and pressed into her hand.

He wouldn't want to know what she had been "up to", she told herself drearily. He would hate to know about Ivor. And

she would hate him to know. She really did not want to hurt Bill. He was such a lamb.

"I expect it's the weather," she said feebly. "After all, it has been a ghastly spring up till now, and I do get out of sorts if I don't have any sunshine."

That was the first Bill had heard of it. He had never regarded Julia as delicate or liable to changes of health with changes of weather. However, he told himself, one was always learning about women, and especially the one you were married to. There were times when he did not understand Ju at all.

He opened *The Times* and tried to amuse her by reading an extract from the Personal column.

"Listen to this. I believe it's meant for you: '*J.—You have ruined my life.—Peter.*' "

Julia's lashes flicked but she did not look at Bill.

"Why for me?"

"J. for Julia," he said, conscious that he was not being very funny.

Her heart warmed to him.

"You *are* a great baby."

He yawned and stretched his arms above his head.

"Poor old Peter, whoever he is. I wonder what J. did to ruin his life."

Julia's lips twisted. She said:

"Ran up too many bills, I expect, and made him bankrupt."

"Oh, cynic! No! She probably eloped with the leader of a skiffle-band." Then he added: "I say, Ju, cheer up, darling. What *is* the matter?"

"Only my headache."

He leaned forward and took one of her hands.

"Poor darling."

She said:

"I would hate to elope. What would you say if I did?"

Bill got off the bed and walked to the window. He was smiling.

"Beat you soundly."

"No, seriously."

"I couldn't possibly be serious about it, darling. To begin with I can't imagine you eloping with anybody."

Her hands clenched until the knuckles gleamed white. She thought :

"That's just it. He's so simple and trusting—he can't even imagine me going away with anybody else."

And she knew that she never could. That never, even for Ivor, could she leave this man who believed in her. He would be so defenceless. His simplicity, his faith, his almost child-like belief in her were his defences, and if she shattered them he would be helpless and wounded to death.

Why in God's name had she come across Ivor Bent? Why must there be this tearing need for him and his arms and his lips?

She heard herself say, with a silly laugh :

"Well, I *shall* elope—with Jealous. Where is my darling boy?"

"Out in the kennel. I say, Ju, it's a grey sort of day and still very cold. I don't think I'll work in the garden to-day. Let's do something together."

Her heart sank. This was the one day on which she would have liked Bill to concentrate on his crazy-paving or his mowing, or whatever he fancied. Just so that she could be alone and get straight with herself. She knew that she could not go on feeling a nervous wreck like this and that she must try to be sensible, for Bill's sake as well as her own. She had got to live the rest of her life with him. She said :

"What?"

"Would you like to run into Brighton and do a cinema this afternoon—or is your head too bad?"

She thought that might be a good thing. It would be something to take her mind off her own personal troubles.

"That would be nice," she said.

"We might stay on and have a steak at Sweetings, if you like," he suggested.

Her heart jerked. No! That wouldn't do! Ivor was going to ring her to-night. She couldn't miss his call. She knew that it would be better if she missed it—if she never spoke to him again –if she offended him by refusing to speak to him! But she couldn't. She wouldn't. Ever since she had said good-bye to him yesterday, she had been living for the moment when she would hear his voice again.

She tried to make her voice casual when she said :

"I don't think we'll stay in Brighton for dinner. We'll get back, and I'll have an early night and then I'll feel quite all right to-morrow."

He fell in with her wishes. He generally did, in the small things.

He did his best to cheer her up. The rain stopped and they drove down the main road from Lewes to Brighton, saw a good film and were on the surface just what they had always been—good companions. What the world would call a well-matched, happily married couple. Bill was happy. It was Julia who went through her own particular purgatory within herself, and realised what a mistake it was to judge anybody on outward appearances.

It was half-past six when they returned to "Katherine's".

It was nearly half-past seven when the telephone bell rang, shattering the silence of the cottage and making Julia's heart almost jump from her breast. At that precise moment Bill was in the bath, which made things distinctly easier for Julia. She answered the call in the study, her breath coming so fast that she could hardly speak.

"Hullo—hullo!"

And then she heard Ivor's voice, so little known to her, and yet so agonisingly familiar.

"Hullo. May I speak to Mrs. Daunt, please."

How she resented that name from him!

She said :

"This is Mrs. Daunt speaking. Yes, yes, it's Julia."

"Are you alone?"

"More or less."

"Then I can say what I want because I'm in a call box. Oh, Julia, my *sweet* !"

She clung to the receiver as though it were a life-belt. All day she had been drowning and now she was saved.

"Oh, Ivor—my dear !"

"Have you missed me?"

"Terribly."

"It's been hell without you. Do you still love me?"

"Terribly." She could say that and it would convey nothing to anybody who listened. But she knew she must be careful.

"Darling," came Ivor's voice, "I don't think I can stand this, can you?"

"It isn't easy."

"That's putting it mildly. It's hell."

"I know."

"Why are you so abrupt? Speak to me. Tell me that you love me as much as you did."

"I can't say more. It isn't possible. You must understand."

"Is anybody listening?"

"They might be."

"Oh, God !" said Ivor in a voice of savage misery.

"How are you?" she asked, yearning for a glimpse of him.

"B——y."

"What have you been doing?"

He had definitely decided not to let her know what Ursula had seen in the studio. He was so afraid it might drive Julia even further from him.

"Trying to paint, but I can't. I can only draw sketches of your head as I remember it and slash the colour of your hair on to the canvas. Your lovely hair !"

Her cheeks burned. She knew that if she could see herself in a mirror it would be a transformed Julia. A woman with eyes brilliant and passionate and lips parted with expectancy.

She loved this man who was saying these things to her. She could sense the uncontrolled urgency of his desire for her, right across the wires. Her own feelings were delirious. She wondered if she had even been a normal, sensible woman—an unsentimental and practical person. She was bewitched—enslaved by a passion which was unlawful and yet so infinitely sweet. There could be no room in her mind or heart for thoughts and memories of Bill, whilst Ivor said such things to her, in such a way.

"I can't stand this, Julia," he was saying now. "Honestly I can't."

"You must try," she forced herself to say.

"Oh! So *you* find it difficult."

"If you only knew how difficult . . ."

"Then let us meet."

"No, no, we can't go into all that again."

"Julia, I'd rather be put on a rack or tortured in any fashion that you can suggest, than go on enduring this pain. I've *got* to see you again."

"We can't—we mustn't."

Then a voice resounded through "Katherine's" coming from Bill's bedroom :

"Ju! I say, Julia bring us up a gin and It, there's a good girl."

Julia put her hand over the mouth of the telephone and called back, her face white again :

"Righto, Bill! Just a sec, darling. I'm on the 'phone."

Then with her lips close to the mouthpiece :

"I've got to go."

A groan from the other end.

"Why? Can't you spare a minute from your husband?"

"You don't understand."

"Well, do you want to see me again?"

"You know I do, but I mustn't."

"Julia, I love you so much that I'll commit suicide if you don't see me."

She gave a broken laugh at this exaggeration and wondered how she was going to stop herself from bursting into tears.

She said in despair :

"I must go. I must."

"Then I'll ring you again."

"No, we said only this once."

She wondered why she was arguing, protesting, when every drop of blood in her body clamoured for him. She supposed that that was what would be called honour, decency, doing the right thing. But was it any more right than *thinking* the wrong thing?

"I said I'd ring you up to see if you were all right. Are you?" Ivor's voice persisted.

"Yes."

"You're happy then?"

"Oh, no, no!"

"Then I'll ring you again."

"When?" she found herself asking, her lips dry and her knees shaking under her.

"To-morrow."

"It's useless. We can't talk."

"Then come up to London and see me."

"No."

"Then I'll write."

"Please, Ivor——"

Silence. Julia spoke again. And again silence, and after that a click and a buzz, and the familiar voice of the village operator.

"Number please."

"I was talking to London," said Julia.

"I'm sorry but they've cleared the line."

Julia hung up the receiver.

She felt badly shaken. She had been hot and glowing all through their conversation, but now that it was over she was shivering. What had it all been about? What had she gained? Nothing! Only the knowledge that Ivor still loved her and

was as unhappy as she was, and that this wasn't the end, this telephone call, as she had meant it to be. It was merely the *beginning*.

In a kind of daze she mixed Bill's drink and took it up to him. He had put on a dark grey lounge suit and when she entered his room, he was passing two brushes over his fair, glistening hair.

"I was just coming down," he said, smiling at her through the mirror. "Damned lazy of me to ask you to bring up the cocktail. Sorry, darling."

"I don't mind," she said laconically and set the glass on his dressing-table. But her hand shook so that she spilt a little of the liquid.

He gave her a passing glance and then rummaged in his drawer for a silk handkerchief.

"You look very charming," he said.

She did not answer. She knew that Bill liked this bottle-green chiffon dinner-dress which she was wearing, and that it suited her, as a rule, but she wondered if she could possibly look charming to-night. She felt so much the reverse. She felt a mess. The whole thing was a horrible mess!

"Who was your call from?" asked Bill.

Then she lied for the second time.

"Oh—just Vi."

"What's the old girl want?"

"Me to go up to town," said Julia on an impulse.

Bill, in his blissful ignorance, flattened any ulterior motive that was at the back of that, by saying:

"Next time you go, I'll run up with you. I must visit my tailor."

She sat down to dinner with Bill that night in a dazed state of mind. Now that the telephone call was over, she found herself looking forward to to-morrow morning's post and wondering if Ivor would write.

II

Of the many closely-written sheets which Julia received from Ivor Bent that next morning, and every morning for the next week, a paragraph in his last letter stood out in her mind and haunted her from the time she read it. She read it, locked in the bathroom. That gave her a horrid, guilty sensation. When she had received the letter, Bill, from the other bed, seeing the bulky envelope, had said :

"Lord ! Somebody's written you a full-length novel. Who?"

And she had lied and murmured something about "an old school friend", knowing that Bill would not ask to see it. He was much too nice a person to ask to see her private correspondence unless she offered it. Up to now she had always offered it tossed across any odd letter that came with the early tea. Curious, in spite of her overwhelming passion for Ivor Bent, how she disliked lying to Bill or doing anything behind his honest back.

But that one page, amongst all the burning protestations of love from her would-be lover remained with her, and blotted out most other thoughts :

"That I love you is beyond all doubt. That you love me I do believe. That such a love as ours is to be flung into the void, I refuse to believe. Julia, you are the One Woman. I must see you again, I must, I SHALL. I know that I am going back on what I said in the studio, but a week apart from you has shown me the impossibility of putting you out of my life and my heart. All day long it is Julia, Julia, Julia! I think it has been Julia since the world began and will be Julia after the world ends. I must see you again . . . !"

With such words as those, how, she asked herself in despair, could she deny this love? How could she keep away from Ivor Bent?

But she did nothing for another week, during which there

was silence from Ivor only to be expected because she answered none of his letters, and merely went on in a blind sort of way, in a grey way, wondering if all the colour had gone out of life for ever, and could only be flashed back into it by a sight of this man whose letters she tore in half and put on the fire and watched the flames curl them into thin black phantoms of love letters.

And there came a final night when her frayed nerves let her down, and with all the will and courage in the world she could not keep from breaking into sudden tears. With the fatal result that Bill found her, was aghast to see her cry, took her in his arms and kept her there.

Against that kindly consolation which must needs develop into more passionate caresses, she was powerless. Without giving way the whole thing she could not send him from her and scream for peace. But in his arms her tears froze, and long afterwards she lay sleepless, staring through the dark, listening to Bill's even breathing and envying him his quiet mind, his freedom from this frantic urge of mind and body toward whom he had no right to love. She felt that she was going to pieces under the stress of desire for Ivor.

The night seemed only a painful interval between the acts of a very painful drama in which she and Ivor, Bill and Ursula were four figures, being moved this way and that, with the most subtle cruelty, by an unknown hand.

She realised that she was not the only one to be pitied. Bill was having a bad deal, without knowing it—Ursula Bent as well. Two nice, loyal people, oblivious of deception.

How could it all end, the tormented Julia asked herself again and again, and awoke one morning at the end of the week heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted to find a letter from Ivor Bent. At last another letter. This time no bulky epistle but two lines which made her throat restrict.

"I can't go on. Can you? I'm going to ring you and we must fix a meeting. I'll ring you first thing in the morning."

Then Julia knew herself very near the danger line. She supposed that she should have stepped back, rushed out of "Katherine's", and avoided that call as she might avoid Satan himself. Instead of which she found herself leaping from the bed and dressing with a sudden sense of intoxication. He couldn't go on. No, neither could she. She didn't care what risks she ran so long as she saw him once again. Only *once*.

Bill was pleased because Julia looked better, had more colour, and seemed fresh and gay this morning. Her breakdown last night had distressed him greatly and had remained unexplained. However, with the nearness and dearness of her in his arms, he had ceased to worry, and now when he saw her eyes smiling across the breakfast-table he accepted the fact that all was well with her and with their little world.

The sun was shining again and the garden looked enchanting. Bill, seeing that some of the green globes of the early tulips had changed to yellow and pink and mauve during the night, went out to examine them with a gardener's pride.

But Julia rushed to answer a telephone call, her heart leaping in that wild way in which it had leapt the last time when she had known that Ivor was at the other end of the wires.

And after that it all hapepened just as was inevitable in spite of all her scorn of herself and her weakness.

"I've got to see you," Ivor said. "I'm half off my head."

"Yes. Yes. It's the same with me. I give in. When? Where?"

And finally the meeting was arranged for this afternoon at three o'clock, outside the Hyde Park Hotel. Bill was certain to go with her, but she could drop him at his tailor's—say she was going on to Vi's. She would fix Vi when she got to town. It would mean that she and Ivor could only have an hour together. But that would be better than nothing. Much better.

When she hung up the receiver after that brief call, Julia's cheeks were fiery red. It was as though a great load had been lifted off her mind. She could breathe again. She no longer had that sensation of suffocating misery. She was going to see *him*.

It was only when Bill was actually driving her up to town that some of the craziness evaporated and Julia saw the complete inadvisability of this course which she was taking.

It must, she presumed, bring fresh misery upon her in the long run. What was there to be gained out of one hectic hour with Ivor? It would be over almost as soon as it began. Then another goodbye, another wrench. More torture. She oughtn't to have come. She ought to have had more sense.

But the car went on, speeding towards London, and every mile bringing her nearer to her heart's desire, and it was much too late to regret going.

She talked a great deal to Bill on that journey and was especially nice to him because she felt so mean and guilty and he was being so nice to her—so much nicer than she deserved.

When she had told him that she wanted to see Vi and do some shopping, he had fallen in with her plans like a lamb, although, as the sun was shining, he would doubtless have preferred a day in the garden. But he had immediately changed into a lounge suit, got out the car, and behaved irreproachably to her. She could have the car, he said. They would have a spot of lunch somewhere, then she could drop him at his club, and he'd go on to his tailor's and meet her at Vi's round about five.

It all worked out beautifully, although Julia was annoyed to find that as things panned out she could have met Ivor long before the appointed hour and had much more time with him. But she could not get in touch with him, so she had to wait until three o'clock.

At last the moment came. She drew the car up outside the Hyde Park Hotel and saw Ivor waiting there, walking up and down. The Ivor of her imagination. The Ivor who had haunted her thoughts, waking and sleeping. She found herself trembling as he caught sight of her and hurried towards her.

The next moment Ivor opened the door of the car, got in beside her and, regardless of passers-by, took her in his arms.

She had made herself look specially chic for him; in a new wine-coloured spot silk shirt with her grey suit, and a youthful Breton sailor hat. The hat was disregarded and with her heart beating madly against his heart, she surrendered herself madly to that crazy embrace. Bill might have been there. Ursula. Anybody that knew them. She didn't care. She only heard him say:

"*Julia!*" and felt the almost painful pressure of his lips against her upturned mouth.

Then the moment passed. Pale and shaken she sat back in the car, both hands locked in his, looking at him dumbly because she could find no words. His eyes were dark and brilliant with happiness.

"Now I live," he said dramatically. "Before, I was a dead man. You killed me with your cruelty, Julia."

She had to laugh.

"Oh darling, why? What cruelty?"

"You wouldn't see me. You wouldn't send me one single line. Two whole weeks—since I've seen you. God—it's been frightful."

"For me too, but it was wise."

"Then may wisdom forever be confounded."

She laughed again, excited, thrilled, a totally different Julia from the one who had walked from room to room at "Katherine's" feeling that she could bear no more.

"Ivor, you're such a child!"

"I'm in love with you, hopelessly and permanently."

Mutely, she shook her head and pulled her hat back into position, over her brow. The traffic, pounding down Knightsbridge, surged past them. Crowds of people hurried along the pavement. They were in the heart of London. But they were in that car, isolated, feasting their gaze each upon the other.

"You look glorious," he said. "Your lovely hair -your eyes —and, oh, your mouth! Julia, you're all the lovely women in history rolled into one, and far, far lovelier!"

She tried to find an answer but could not. There was no coping with such a lover as this.

But here she was, lapping it up, loving it, wanting more.

She found relief from her embarrassment by drawing her hands away from his and starting up the engine.

"Let's get away from here."

"Yes, let's drive to the ends of the earth, for heaven's sake."

Then her sense of humour returned. As they drove away, she said :

"If you go on talking to me like this we'll drive into a motor-bus, and anyway I haven't enough petrol to get us to the ends of the earth, my sweet. We'll do what a lot of other miserable lovers have done and go into the park."

"I adore you," he said.

And sat with a hand pressed upon her knee while she turned the car in through the big iron gateway into Hyde Park. She drove without speaking until they came to the Serpentine, and then drew up and sat there, facing the glittering water opposite the bathing pool. Ivor looked about him impatiently and said :

"There are far too many people here."

"There are anywhere in London," she said. "It's just impossible to be alone."

"What a contemptible fact—that in the whole of London there is no oasis for lovers such as ourselves."

"Not unless we go to Richmond and that's too far. I've got to be at Vi's soon after four. I 'phoned her and told her that I was shopping until then."

He looked at his wrist-watch.

"It's a quarter-past three. That only leaves us three-quarters of an hour. Julia, I can't stand it."

"Let's just be happy now that we're together," she begged.

He leaned forward and kissed her on both eyes.

"It's something like heaven, seeing you again. Tell me everything about yourself. All that's happened since we parted."

She told him what little there was to tell. Ivor looked at her sombrely when she had finished.

"If you knew what it means to me to picture you alone in that place with that darned husband of yours——"

She felt the queer necessity to uphold Bill.

"He's been such a dear, really, and I loathe all the lies, and oh somehow it's so much more difficult to give him a stab in the back than it would be a man who was really a 'darned husband'."

Ivor's gloom intensified. It didn't amuse him to hear Julia defend Daunt. She said :

"I want to hear all about you—and Ursula."

He, too, had little to tell. It had just been nine days of unmitigated hell, he said. Ursula had been more than usually exacting. Funny how a woman always was when you least wanted her to be. The children were tiresome. He couldn't paint. He couldn't settle down to anything.

He was afraid to tell Julia why Ursula was so exacting. How much more suspicious she was since she had seen him kissing Julia. It was bad enough for him. He need not make things any worse for Julia. She had her own troubles with her own husband.

He was just a caged animal, getting more and more savage behind iron bars, until this morning when he heard her voice over the 'phone telling him that she would see him again.

"You set me free!" he finished. "And now I'm myself again. But look here, Julia, you're not going to tell me that we can go back—you to Bill and I to Ursula—and start this torment all over again. We might as well consign ourselves to our coffins right away, and be done with it."

She sat staring at the river unseeingly. The first rapture had passed. She was miserable again and afraid. She did wish so much that the thought of Bill wouldn't tug at her heartstrings while she sat beside her lover. She wasn't really the type to have clandestine meetings and secret affairs, she told herself

wryly. But Ivor seemed to thrive on it. He had no qualms about Ursula. He seemed to regard this love as his prerogative.

The old arguments began. Passionately Ivor urged that it would be futile and cowardly of them both to throw this great passion on to the dust heap just because the law said "no", and duty and respectability put up warning hands. Wasn't it worse than prostitution, he argued, that she should go back and give herself to a husband whom she did not love and never really loved, and refuse herself to a man whom she did love, just because she had a wedding ring on her finger, and a licence somewhere in the safe? Weren't they both entitled to some memory which would carry them through the sterile years of the future?

It was agreed that they could not desert their partners and their homes. Neither of them wanted to do that. But they must have something—*something* to hold on to. She, with her principles, the sort of life she led with her husband, could not and would not be expected to become any man's mistress or drag through weeks and months of a hole-in-the-corner affair. He knew it would only weary and finally disgust her. He wouldn't want to risk that. He wanted to hold her love, her respect, forever. He knew that he must renounce any hopes of seeing her perpetually, except perhaps in the far distant future as a friend, if they could ever sink the physical side and become just platonic companions.

But why not *one* day and night together? One stolen twenty-four hours from all the other thousands which they must spend apart?

With all the force and fire of which he was capable, Ivor Bent pleaded with Julia, downing every feeble protest that she made, cleverly disproving her every argument. Like a man fighting for his life in a Court of Justice, he fought for her acceptance of him as a lover, truly and wholly a lover, once and once only.

It would be wicked, he said, criminal, to choke this great emotion out of existence, cut down the lovely bud of it before

it could flower for a single day. Wouldn't it mean everything in the world to them both to be together once—to know no barriers, no conventions, be really alone, away from crowds.

"It would be something to remember," he kept on saying, "something to remember. That would mean so much to me, Julia, to feel that you have belonged to me."

Exhausted by the fiery discussion and terrified of her own weakness, she listened and brooded over what he said. She tried to be firm right from the beginning. It couldn't be wise, she protested. And it would never *mean* once, and once only. If a thing like that happened, it would surely happen again. When Ivor said no, that they would be strong, she reminded him that they had said so before, only to discover that they were both hopelessly weak. Once she had been away with him she would want to go again. He would want to take her. Oh, he must see that it was just the thin end of the wedge, and it would be far better never to meet again.

Then he accused her of not loving him as much as he loved her, and not needing him as vitally. And that brought from her a swift cry of :

"That's cruel, and not true. You know it, Ivor !"

The arguments began all over again. She felt her head whirling and her heart whirling with it. This was temptation in its most acute form. For oh, the sweet, dangerously sweet force of his arguments and the incredible ecstasy of the picture that he drew of them stealing away together to some lovely, lonely spot where, for a few hours, anyhow, they could live for each other, where there was no one to say them "Yea" or "Nay".

After all, wasn't he right and justified, when he said that it would be a crime to let their love go forever unfulfilled? She was not only in debt to Bill, but to herself. This passion was something new and wonderful in her life. She must go through with it or brand herself forever afterwards as a coward—drifting on to an old age and the inevitable, impotent realisation of lost opportunities.

When she spoke of Bill and Ursula, Ivor was eloquent. He knew that they would both be breaking the Commandments, he said, and defying the Law—that they ought to be as loyal to these two to whom they were tied. But he was giving Ursula the rest of his life and she, Julia, belonged to Bill for the rest of hers. Bill and Ursula had the best of it. How could it hurt if they knew nothing of the affair?

Then Julia with a twist to the lips said :

"*If*. But it would be a ghastly risk."

Again Ivor was eloquent.

What risk could there be if they both had watertight explanations? They could choose some small, little-known inn in the country. Julia need not take her car, because it was recognisable, and he would hire a car for the day and drive it. He would tell Ursula that he was going to see a man he knew down in Gloucester, a dealer who occasionally bought pictures from him. Ursula would never find out, never. Therefore she would never suffer over it. And surely she, Julia, could give Bill a reasonable excuse and be quite successful with it.

Julia got as far as wondering what her own alibi would be —toying with the idea—knowing full well that she was getting nearer and nearer to the precipice and that she was mad not to draw back before this strong, desperate desire pushed her completely over the edge.

She could, of course, confide in Vi, and tell Bill that she was going away for the night with Vi. She was absolutely reliable and would never give her away. But Julia disliked that idea. It would be letting a third into a secret which should be hers and Ivor's alone. It was not fair to drag another person into an episode like this, which really only concerned the two in the game. It would be taking an unfair advantage of friendship to expect a friend to stand by her misdeeds.

There was of course that aunt in Godalming. A very distant aunt whom Julia had not bothered to see for years. She might suddenly discover a family reason for wishing to see Aunt

Agatha. (How she wished that Norman, her brother, was in the country, instead of out in Vancouver, where he had been for the last three years with the Canadian girl whom he had married. Dear old Norman would have stood by her, no matter how shocked he might have been!) Which reminded her that the whole of her own family up in Leicester would have been more than shocked about this affair. It wasn't playing the game. And what about Bill? Was it not repaying all his love and faith in a rotten kind of way? Wasn't it being rather mean and mucky to put her own little desires in front of allegiance to Bill?

Yet through the tangle of her reflections and doubts and fears, there burnt steadily and fiercely the white flame of her desire for Ivor. Sitting here close to him, feeling his hands upon her, his lips straying at intervals to her lips, quickening every pulse in her, Julia could not overcome her longing to acquiesce and take what the gods offered just once. She would vow that it would never happen again—and keep that vow no matter what others had been broken.

"'You can fix something—we both can," Ivor went on pleading, "and I swear you won't regret it, my lovely one. I'll make it unforgettable for you. You believe that, don't you?"

She put one of his slim artist's hands against her burning cheek and whispered:

"I do, indeed."

"Then come with me, Julia—come away just once, my dear."

"Is it right to put ourselves first?" she argued feebly. "If we were found out, it would ruin all our lives."

"Supposing you *were* forced into a divorce and marriage with me," he said, "would it matter to you so much? You don't love your husband."

She said with honesty:

"But curiously enough I do love him in my way, Ivor. I'm not *in love*, which makes all the difference."

"He knew that when he married you."

"So did I, but I accepted all that he had to offer me because I thought I would probably never feel a *grande passion.* And having taken all that he has to give, I don't think I have any right to let him down."

Ivor shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't quite so honest or full of conscience as his Julia. He put himself and his own desires before Ursula or his children.

He argued again :

"Well, you won't need to let your Bill down. He won't know about it. Julia, we *must* be lovers once before we die. Say you'll come with me, please."

She said :

"I must go now, darling. I'll give you your answer tomorrow."

"I couldn't stand that," he said. "I could never get through another night like last night. Don't keep me in suspense, Julia, for God's sake."

"Ivor, it wants thinking over, surely! It's such an important step to take. You're so reckless, darling. I——"

"Be reckless with me," he broke in, drawing her into his arms. "Don't fight any more, Julia. Say 'yes' to me now, now."

She drew a long, long breath and shut her eyes. And then suddenly it was as though the storm subsided in her mind and she was quite calm and secure in his embrace and serenely aware of a fate which she could not alter, of a predestined act which must be accomplished. She said :

"Very well. I'll come!"

III

It seemed that from the moment that Julia told Ivor Bent that she would do as he asked, she moved, not of her own volition, but as though propelled by something, someone outside herself. She felt that the Julia best known to Bill and to her friends had vanished, and given place to another Julia—a woman madly, inconsequently in love, and that this

emotion had destroyed that other Julia's normal reasoning powers, her usually cool judgment. She knew also that in promising to go away with her lover she made one of the hastiest and most reckless decisions of her life. Yet having made it, she could not and would not draw back. She did not want to. A feeling of guilt persisted in her subconscious mind, as did a genuine remorse over Bill, almost a hatred of herself for being willing to betray him. But the longing to have this one day and night of her life with her lover, was the dominating influence through the hours spent with Bill before her betrayal of him became a *fait accompli*.

It must happen. She must go to Ivor. Therefore the less fuss that was made about it and the more calmly she resigned herself to what was obviously her destiny, the better, she told herself.

It might be weak to commit an act of betrayal or strong as the case may be. Who knew which was weakest—to resist or give way to a dangerous impulse? And who cared at this juncture? But she did, at least, despise vacillation and having told Ivor that she would go with him, she did not allow any misgivings or fears to lead her into a retraction of her word.

She even began to look at herself queerly as though she was a second person watching this Julia who behaved so irrationally and was in love in a hot, tempestuous manner, which she had a while ago thought purely fictitional.

She interested her, this Julia who had once led a quiet, normal existence in a country cottage with a husband whom she accepted with affection, even though she was not in love with him, and who, only a fortnight ago, came across a vital, clever artist at a dinner party and having seen him once or twice, talked with him, felt drawn to him, ended in his arms.

She saw clearly, however, that there must not be any delay over the accomplishment of the plans that she had made with her lover. They must be carried out either now or never. If they waited, doubts and difficulties might arise and wield themselves into iron barriers which would never be broken down.

So the old Julia watched the new Julia and was a little amazed at the ease with which she manipulated the situation. It all seemed unnatural and automatic. And when she allowed a gleam of humour to break through the curiously sombre and even sinister atmosphere pervading her at this particular state of the affair, she thought :

"I needn't think that I'm the only unfaithful wife and that everything is going to crash because I intend to deceive Bill and go away with Ivor. It's happened to millions of other women and it will happen again, and the world has gone on as usual. Only somehow I just thought *I* would never do it, that's all !"

She returned to "Katherine's" with Bill that night following her meeting with Ivor, and went on with her life in such ordinary fashion that she found it hard to believe that anything out of the ordinary was going to happen.

She was particularly nice to Bill. That seemed slightly hypocritical. And yet it was not really hypocrisy. She *wanted* to be nice to him. She hadn't the slightest desire to hurt Bill. Indeed, she hoped devoutly that he would never know about Ivor. Had she thought there was any real risk of his finding out, she would not go. She knew it would hurt him too badly. But she believed, perhaps with over-optimism, that he would never find out. And when she came back she would spend the rest of her life secretly making up to him for what he had, unknowingly, lost.

It was all cut and dried. She told Bill that Aunt Agatha wanted to see her. The said aunt being old, and not in a very good state of health, was perhaps regretting her lack of interest in her one and only niece. Julia would not take the car, she said, but go up to town by train and from town by train to Godalming.

Ivor on his part would tell Ursula that he was going to Gloucester on business. The lovers were to meet in town and then drive away—to some unknown destination.

Bill took in Julia's story with the simple complacency which

was expected of him. He evinced some slight surprise that this Aunt Agatha had never appeared on the scene before, although, of course, he had known she existed; and he heaped a few coals upon Julia's head by saying :

"Sounds good to me if the old girl wants to see you, darling. Perhaps she'll leave you an odd penny. Hope so for your sake."

It was so like Bill to wish her well and send her off with his blessing, thought Julia. Under the circumstances she would really rather he had grumbled or been a little difficult. Why, she wondered, must he always make things so hard for her by the very fact that he made them so easy?

There was only this one evening, this one night to be got through. She was going with Ivor to-morrow. It seemed like any other evening, spent in front of the log-fire in her lovely sitting-room, with the Alsatians at her feet, a book in her hand, and Bill tinkering with the radio, which had ceased to function. And the only difference lay within Julia, herself. She could not read her book. She could only turn the pages blindly and think,

"To-morrow!"

That thought of going away with Ivor was so stupendous that it was unreal. The swiftness of the whole affair took away her breath. This love had descended upon her like an avalanche. She knew, of course, that there must be an awakening —another to-morrow, when it would be all over, and that she must say goodbye to Ivor for ever and come back here to Bill —*for ever*! But she was not going to allow herself to brood over that. "Sufficient unto the day" must be her motto. She had borne enough these two weeks. Now she was going to be happy. A price must be paid for that happiness, but why let the thought of it spoil to-morrow?

She woke early to the usual sound of the swallows twittering in the eaves, to the cuckoo's regular cry, to that familiar peace within the white, timbered walls of "Katherine's", and to the yellow, blessed sunshine coming through the open casements telling her that at last spring was here.

She awoke with a feeling of immense excitement. She was glad that it was a fine day for her—for love!

Lighting a cigarette, waiting for the early tea, she stole a glance at the recumbent form of Bill and at the back of his fair tousled head. She felt very tender towards him. She thought:

"You're always so good to me. You've always given me what I want. Give me this day and night, Bill. Don't begrudge it. Let me be *really* happy for once in my life. You haven't been able to make me happy this way. Let somebody else do it and forgive me—please!"

The next day began in a normal way, and everybody was, perhaps, more cheerful than usual because of the sunshine, and that lovely warmth, which was such a pleasant change from the cold winds and rain of recent weeks.

As she shut and locked her suitcase, Julia's cheeks burned, her breath quickened, and she bit rather hard, in an excited way, on her lower lip. She had not dreamed it would be *this* sort of a special occasion! Even now that she was about to leave the house and go to Ivor, she could not believe that she was really doing it.

She had thought that when she said goodbye to Bill that she would feel miserable. Yet such was not the case. There seemed no time, no room for miseries. She kissed him naturally and gaily, apologising for leaving him alone again, and he stood on the platform, waving as the train went out, wishing her a happy time with "Aunt Agatha". She called out:

"See you to-morrow, my dear!"

These were the words with which she left him. And incidentally the words which made everything seem all right. To-morrow she would be back with him, doing her duty, possibly in the depths of misery, but *she would be back,* and he would have nothing to reproach her with nothing.

She was alone in the carriage. She tried to settle down to a daily paper, but could not concentrate on it because her mind would teem with this and that. As soon as she got to town

she was going straight to her hairdresser to have her hair washed. She must have a manicure. Then to Ivor, and the newly hired car awaiting her, outside the trysting place of yesterday—the Hyde Park Hotel. They had planned to have lunch, and then drive away immediately afterwards, out of town.

She hoped that Ivor would like everything that she had brought with her and that he wouldn't be disappointed in *her*. She could almost feel his brilliant clever eyes upon her, those shrewd artist's eyes so sensitive to form and colour. Now he thought her perfect. She prayed he would continue to think so. It would be so awful if he discovered flaws.

To-day, to-night, was theirs. To-morrow belonged to Bill and Ursula, and on that she would not dwell because it was too appalling. How kind Bill had been, sweet as usual! She wondered if Ursula had been equally kind and packed Ivor's bag for him and wished him luck with his business? She, Julia, ought to feel a cad, an outsider. Not only was she stabbing Bill in the back, but aiding and abetting Ivor's treachery to his wife and children. Well, if she allowed herself to brood on the wrongfulness of the affair, no doubt she would soon reduce herself to a state of unhappiness and self-loathing. And that could only result either in her backing out at the eleventh hour and letting Ivor down, or ruining what little time they had together. She must not do either of these things.

Turning over the pages of the paper, her eye was caught by a headline :

"ARMY OFFICER SUES FOR DIVORCE."

She read with interest. But it was not an interesting case—just an ordinary one : Captain X discovering that while he was away on a rifle course, his wife had stayed at a hotel with a brother officer. There was no defence. Captain X was granted a divorce and the custody of the one child of the marriage.

Julia lifted her gaze from the paper and stared out of the

window at the passing scenery. A little of the old Julia came back, the old, thinking, sensible Julia, swiftly and suddenly chilling her. If she had read that even a week ago, she would have thought how rotten it was of Captain X's wife to let him down while he was away, and wondered how any woman could bring herself to smash up her home for the sake of a new thrill!

To-day here she was, Julia Daunt, about to do the same thing that Captain X's wife had done. Possibly Captain X's wife had not meant to be found out or to be divorced. But she had gambled and lost. She, Julia, was gambling too—and supposing she lost? *Supposing she was found out?* There was always the possibility, no matter how obscure the hotel they chose, and a mutual friend might meet them and Bill might get to know. Or Ursula might find out and involve her, Julia, in an action. A dozen things might happen. Then what would her reactions be? How would she like to find herself outcast with Ivor, conscious that she had smashed everything up all round them both?

It was not a pretty thought, but it had to be entertained, and the feeling of chill, of sinking in her heart, increased as the train drew nearer to London—until the Julia who stepped out of the train with a suitcase in her hand, instead of being a reckless, rapturous woman going to her lover, was just a pale, rather harassed girl with a hundred misgivings. A growing conviction that she was doing something which she would ever afterwards regret.

For one wild moment she even contemplated telling Ivor that she could not go through with it—could not risk delivering Bill that blow. No matter how much she was in love with Ivor, she knew she would not be happy to go away with him permanently, under existing circumstances.

The flat, slightly sickish sensation stayed with her all that morning while her hair was washed and her nails manicured and varnished to the deep rosy pink which suited her fingers. She alternated between the breathless anticipation of what

lay facing her—and the unhappy, cowardly wish to cut and run—run back to Bill, to honour, to security.

This, then, was what a woman had to go through when she took a step like this, Julia told herself dismally during that morning of mental battles. It wasn't only a question of framing a story and getting away successfully. It was largely a matter of settling an account with oneself, and that was the hardest of all things to do. There were, no doubt, women without any conscience. Julia had thought that she had drowned hers, when she bade a blithe goodbye to Bill. But it was coming back—coming through with a vengeance now.

Only when she met her lover, stepped into the big blue saloon car—an American car which he had hired—and sat beside him, did the whole tumult of her sensations and reflections converge into one enormous emotional conviction; that she loved him and must belong to him and must go through with this thing. Before that conviction, everything else faded. It was as though she offered up a sacrifice—abandoning herself—her old sane, moral self, to the new Julia who, lovely, reckless and yielding, melted into Ivor Bent's embrace and lifted starved lips for his kisses.

CHAPTER VI

I

URSULA BENT wandered round her husband's studio, tidying up. A job which she detested from the bottom of her soul, although she knew that it must be done, and expected no thanks from Ivor. He hated anybody rummaging about his studio and would much prefer to leave it with the dust of centuries upon it. In fact there had never been a day when the studio had been cleaned, that something had not gone wrong. Something was sure to be lost. Ursula or Mrs. Rogers would be accused. With a certain apathetic indifference to probable rows, however, Ursula continued to turn out the studio at intervals—nearly always when Ivor went away for a day.

Yesterday when he had left her, he had seemed in unusually high spirits. He had even given her a cheque for £10 to buy school things for Flip, who had started her holidays and was wanting a dozen and one things before next term.

Ursula supposed that Ivor saw chances of a sale, down in Gloucester with that friend, Philip Lewishon, the art dealer, who was an admirer of Ivor's work outside his commercial art, and had given him one or two commissions for the Van Gogh type of painting of which Ivor was so fond.

He was due back this afternoon or late this evening. In a few minutes Mrs. Rogers would be coming up to scrub the floor. Ivor refused to have a carpet. He liked bare boards so that he could drop things and spill things without care. He really was a gracelessly careless person. But, Ursula reminded herself ruefully, she wasn't much tidier herself, so she couldn't really grumble at him.

She opened all the windows, shutting tired eyes and sniffing

the warm spring air for a moment. How she wished she could go down to the country with the children. Well, there might be a chance next week to take Flip and Ann-Louise to Cooden. Betty, her cousin, had arrived back from India and got in touch with her. She had taken a bungalow at Cooden Beach, and wanted Ursula to go down with the two little girls, who would, she said, make nice companions for her two small boys whom she had just brought back from India.

Ursula needed that change badly. But she supposed that even the rest and the sea air would not take away that constant ache in her back. Only an operation could do that. She could not and would not be operated on. Ivor agreed. He had a horror of anæsthetics. They had a great deal in common still in spite of all their arguments. Of course he was damnably selfish and quite callous at times. But she understood him and he could be so charming. He had been charming the day before yesterday. It had been quite like old times. He had insisted upon giving Mrs. Rogers extra pay to stay with the children, and had taken Ursula out to dinner in Soho. Then to a film. When she had discussed the week with Betty, he had, to her surprise, fallen in at once with the suggestion that she should go away. He had even offered to give her the fare, and a new dress and hat for the occasion. Quite happy and reasonable and different from the Ivor who lost his temper when she asked for the housekeeping money.

She had missed him this last twenty-four hours. He created a lot of "atmosphere" and trouble, and doubled the work when he was at home. Yet she felt lost without him. Of course the trouble was, that Ursula was still in love with him, and she knew it. Even the children could not make up to her for Ivor.

She walked round the studio, picking up odd tubes of paint, brushes, rags, canvases, putting them away, covering easels and pictures, preparing for Mrs. Rogers' spring-clean.

As she covered a half finished poster, a clever piece of work, she sighed and thought :

"He's a genius really."

And she thought, too, what a pity it was that there was that half French side to him. She felt that if he had been wholly English, he might have been steadier, and they might have been more suited to each other.

Yet some of the solid British husbands Ursula met were very dull. She had to admit that she wouldn't have liked a dull husband. Only one had to pay a certain price for being married to an erratic, brilliant painter!

The studio door opened and Flip, the Bent's eldest-born, came in with a rush. Not a pretty child, but with an amusing little face and her mother's fiery hair. Later she would have a good figure, but now she was in the thin, bony stage. The sleeves of her blue jersey were too short, showing her red wrist-bones, and she had outgrown the school tunic, which made her legs in their well-darned cashmere stockings look far too long and spindly.

"Mummy!" she said excitedly, "there's a policeman at the door."

"A policeman!" echoed Ursula.

"Yes, Mrs. Rogers opened the door and I saw him. Isn't it exciting! What's he want, Mummy? Is it to take us all to prison?"

Ursula, warm and sticky after her efforts in the studio, rubbed the palms of her hands on her handkerchief and smiled.

"Silly chump, of course not. Did he say what he wanted?"

Then Mrs. Rogers appeared, looking a little scared.

"Please, can you come at once? The officer says it's a car accident."

And then Ursula stiffened and the smile faded from her lips.

An accident! Was it Ivor? But he wasn't in a car. He had gone down to Gloucester by train.

The news which she received from the policeman came as a terrific shock. She stood staring stupidly at the big uniformed man who, with helmet pushed on the back of his head and a pad and pencil in hand, delivered the blow with a certain awkward sympathy.

As in a nightmare, Ursula heard what he had to say and answered his questions.

Yes, she was Mrs. Ivor Bent. No, she had no idea her husband was in a car. At Felpdown? Where was Felpdown? She believed her husband to be in Gloucester. Felpdown, the policeman informed her, was a few miles out of Godalming. Mr. Bent's car had come into collision with a lorry. He was in Felpdown Cottage Hospital, unconscious, with a head wound. The Felpdown police had notified London and they had sent at once to ask her to go down to the injured man.

Ursula's heart thudded. Her whole body was breaking out into perspiration.

"Are you *sure* it's my husband?" she asked.

"Yes, mum. They found his driving licence, some letters and papers. No, he isn't dying, mum, but he's badly hurt and you'd better come."

"Who was he with?" Ursula asked, and her mind flew to Philip Lewishon. Her first supposition was that Philip Lewishon was driving Ivor home and that they had passed through Godalming.

Then the policeman coughed and looked red and averted his gaze and said :

"The gentleman was with a lady. She was injured too. There was some mistake, if you don't mind me saying it, mum, and she was took into the hospital as Mrs. Bent. But when she come to, they found that she was someone else."

The blood flew to Ursula's face, and she felt suddenly sick. She said : "I'll go to Felpdown at once."

Then she shut the door, avoided Flip's artless questioning, locked herself in the bathroom and was actually sick.

When she recovered sufficiently to go to her bedroom, wash and do her hair, and find some clothes to put on, she was very cold, and comparatively self-possessed. Hers was not an hysterical nature. After years of hardship and struggle against her own inclinations, she was girded with a certain courage and ability to meet misfortune.

This thing was the biggest blow Fate had ever dealt her. For she knew now that Ivor had not gone to Gloucester to see Philip Lewishon on business. He had been away with a woman—some woman in a car whom they thought to be his wife. And that woman, of course, was Julia Daunt. Ivor had lied when he had told her he had not seen Julia since that day in the studio. His kindness and attention to her, Ursula, lately, had been a blind. He had been meeting Julia behind her back. And he had even gone so far as to take her away for the night.

It was a horrible, bitter blow. But her indignation and her sense of courage were swamped at this moment by concern for Ivor. For his physical safety. He might be dying. She must go to him. He would need her. And if there was likely to be any scandal, she must avert it, for the sake of Flip and Ann-Louise.

In a dazed way Ursula managed to get dressed and collect a purse and see that there was some money in it, then seek the help of Mrs. Rogers.

"Mr. Bent has had an accident," she said, "and I've got to go at once to Felpdown Hospital. Will you please take care of the children till I come back?"

Mrs. Rogers at once climbed down from her usual pinnacle of virtuous disapproval of the people for whom she worked and of the whole of the upper classes, and abandoned herself to an orgy of morbid interest in Mr. Bent's accident. Wiping her soapy hands on her apron, she was enthralled by the disaster. She gave earnest promises not to let the children out of sight.

"Pore lambs!" said Mrs. Rogers as though they were already fatherless.

Fortunately for Ursula, Ann-Louise was sleeping and could not set up a roar at her departure, and Flip, unaware of the disaster, forgot to resent losing her mother for the day, because Ursula pressed sixpence into Flip's grubby little fingers and told her to go out for a walk with Mrs. Rogers, later on, and buy herself and Ann-Louise some sweets.

It took Ursula over an hour to get to Godalming. There

was no question of economy. No trailing round by bus or Underground. She took a taxi straight to Waterloo and then by train—the longest train journey she had ever taken, so it seemed, although it was actually only a matter of an hour.

Once at Godalming she discovered that Felpdown had no station of its own and could be reached only by a bus which ran at long intervals, or by car.

Again Ursula waived aside caution so far as money was concerned and took the first vehicle which she saw for hire.

Her brain refused to act very clearly as she sat clasping her bag to her, staring out at the countryside. She could do nothing but wonder whether or not Ivor was dying. That would seem impossible, her vital, handsome Ivor! The Ivor who had been so difficult, at times so heartbreaking, and yet was still so agonisingly dear.

She found herself thinking vaguely how nice and fresh the countryside looked to-day. This first real morning of spring. The trees were breaking into leaf. Everywhere there was the white and pink of fruit blossom, the fresh young green of new hedges, and as the car drove Ursula past private gardens, she caught sudden glimpses of vivid japonica, beds of early tulips and polyanthus, purple fringes of grape hyacinths.

Ursula loved the country. As a little girl she had spent a lot of time in the country, and since the birth of her own children she had longed to have a cottage and a garden in which they could play. She had been forced to make a London flat her home because of Ivor and his work. It struck her at this moment sharply that she had spent the last twelve years living her life entirely for Ivor. And in return he had betrayed her. Her bitterness and grief at his act of betrayal were secondary to her overwhelming anxiety for him.

She reached Felpdown Cottage Hospital, a long, low, red-tiled building with a pretty, cared-for garden flanked by tall firs. As she got out of the car and pressed the bell she thought how unlike a hospital it seemed. It might have been a big country house. It was all very attractive and there was nothing

frightening about it. It did not seem to indicate pain—or death—like a big, unfriendly institution.

But her knees were trembling and her face was ashen when she said to the white-coated man who opened the door :

"I'm Mrs. Ivor Bent. I've come to see my husband."

And with dread and almost horror, she scanned the man's face, to see if she could judge by his expression whether Ivor was dying, or already dead.

But the man's face betrayed nothing. He said :

"If you will come in, I'll send sister to you."

She followed him along a white corridor to a waiting-room. Now the odour of antiseptics and ether from a recent operation wafted to her nostrils. In the waiting-room, alone, she sat down weakly in a chair and passed a handkerchief over her face. She found herself praying, which was a thing she had not done for years. Praying for Ivor.

Whatever he had done, she did not want him to die. She did not want to lose him. Or had she already lost him, she wondered if not by death, through this woman with whom he had gone away?

The door opened. She looked up, panting, as though out of breath. Two people came into the room. A pleasant-looking nurse in blue starched dress and white cap and a tall, fair man, wearing grey flannels. A distinguished-looking man, she thought, with grave eyes and lips.

He stood twirling a hat between his hands. He seemed ill-at-ease. The sister advanced towards Ursula and said :

"Mrs. Ivor Bent?"

Ursula stood up.

"Yes," she said.

"We have good news for you, Mrs. Bent, so don't be frightened. Your husband is not as seriously hurt as we thought at first. He recovered consciousness half-an-hour ago. He's being tidied up and made comfortable, and I'll fetch you to him in just a few minutes."

Ursula wanted to burst into tears. Her throat constricted

so that she could scarcely speak. Her eyes filled. She forgot everything but her relief when she heard that news. At last she managed to gasp :

"I'm—so glad."

The sister patted her arm.

"Would you like a nice drink—a cup of tea or coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"Then I'll leave you for a minute. And Mr. Daunt, I must ask you to wait a bit longer, too. Your wife will be able to see you quite shortly. What a good thing they're both as little hurt as they are. I believe it was a terrible smash. They might easily have been killed. Very lucky for them both."

She went out of the room, closing the door behind her. Ursula stood still, looking at the man named Daunt.

She drew a sibilant breath. She said slowly :

"So you're Mr. Daunt. It's your wife who was—with Ivor in this smash."

Bill Daunt flung his hat on to the table. He looked away from Ursula Bent. Under the tan his face had a greyish look. It was a wooden face, thought Ursula. The eyes alone had expression. She had never seen eyes so bitterly hurt.

He said :

"That's right. I don't quite know what to say."

"Neither do I. I don't know anything—I don't understand. Do you know what it all means?"

"Yes," said Bill Daunt grimly. "I do."

"But what—what?"

"Your husband and my wife spent the night together in Felpdown," Bill said in the same hard, grim voice. "They were on their way back to town this morning when they were smashed up—that's all."

Ursula turned red, then white. She felt horribly ashamed. She opened her lips to speak and then shut them again. Then Bill Daunt said more gently :

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid this has been rather a bad shock for you. But you'd have to have known sooner or later. Their

luggage has been sent for. They were at the Felpdown Arms."

"Well," said Ursula, grim, suffering, "what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen my wife yet. You haven't seen your husband. I think perhaps it would be much better if we don't discuss anything until we have both heard what they have to say."

Ursula looked dazed. She thought :

"What a strange man. He's so frightfully self-possessed. Some men would have been like raving lunatics. *Ivor* would have been."

And for a minute she hated Ivor—hated him for what he had done both to her and to the children and to this nice man. He looked so nice. What a cad the woman must be. What an absolute cad !

The door opened and the sister who had come in with Bill put her head inside. She said :

"You may both come along now. I think the patients are in a fit state to see you."

Without looking at each other, Bill and Ursula turned and followed her out of the waiting-room and were taken to separate parts of the hospital.

II

Several hours before this, Bill Daunt had been helping Orchard lift a millstone from the bottom of the garden at "Katherine's" up to the lawn nearer the house. He intended building a sun-dial out of old stone for Julia, who had a passion for sun-dials.

Bill had been very happy for two reasons. First because it was a fine sunny day and looked as though the weather had really changed for the better. Second because Julia was coming back this evening. He missed her badly when she was away. And this was the second time within two weeks that the little wretch had left him alone. He was not sure he liked it. But of course if there was a chance of being included in old Aunt

Agatha's will, she had to go, and he wasn't going to stop her.

He was not the type of man to indulge in retrospection nor inquire too closely into the whys and wherefores of things. He was a stoic, accepting philosophically the vagaries and vicissitudes of this life. Yet under the surface there ran through Bill a strata of sensitiveness little dreamed of by those who came in contact with him, little known even to Julia, herself. He was a man not given to betraying his inner self, except on rare occasions, and incapable of whining when he was hurt. There had been no other woman, really, except Julia in Bill's life. She filled his life and he was enormously content with her. His belief in her was as profound as his love for her.

The fact that she had never responded as ardently to his passion as he would have liked, rarely troubled him. She was always sweet and tender, and only in their early days together had he been anxious, and wondered whether he had done the right thing to cajole her into a marriage which she had not really wanted to make. But their contentment and good companionship of the last few years had driven away any such doubts from his mind, and he was confident now that Julia was utterly his and always would be.

When, in the middle of his gardening, the daily came running out to tell him that a policeman wanted to see him, Bill said :

"Take a message, Alice. I'm busy."

Then Alice returned with a scared face and said :

"I think you'd better come. It's about Mrs. Daunt. An accident . . ."

And at that, like a shot, Bill abandoned his work and ran into the house, muddy boots and all.

When he received the same information that had been given Ursula, and realised that Julia and some man had been in a car smash near Godalming, it never entered his head that she had anything to conceal, nor that he had any cause for worry otherwise than over her personal safety. It was to Godalming she had gone to visit her aunt. No doubt this man with whom she had been in the car was a relation or friend of the said

aunt. His main sensation was of black fear lest her injuries should be fatal.

To save time, he kept on his old garden clothes, merely changed his boots for a pair of clean shoes, got out the car and drove, more recklessly than Bill had ever driven, to Godalming. For the first time in his life he risked being fined by exceeding the speed limit in built-up areas, cutting in on other cars, letting the hired car full out on the straighter roads. A drive of unbearable suspense with nothing in his heart and mind save the passionate hope that he would find Julia alive.

When he reached Felpdown Hospital, a little before Ursula, he was told that Julia was by no means dying. She received cuts and bruises. She had been flung out of the car, which had turned over, and had lost consciousness. But an examination had proved that there were no serious injuries. She was suffering from shock, Bill was told, and should stay in hospital for a few days.

He was not allowed to see her until she had been "tidied up" as the sister put it to him. Julia was still dazed, and as yet unaware that Bill had been sent for. But they had found a letter, a driving licence and insurance certificate, and some visiting cards in her purse, proving her identity. So they had got in touch with him, as her next-of-kin.

Bill's first feeling was of overwhelming relief. It was not until he made a few more inquiries about the accident that the disastrous truth unfolded itself.

In a somewhat tortuous fashion it leaked out, bit by bit. First of all, of course, he learned that the man who had driven the car, which had come in contact with a lorry, on a cross-roads, was Ivor Bent. That gave him the first shock. *Ivor Bent?* That painter fellow whom she had met at Vi's. But, good God, what was *he* doing down here with Julia? Why was she in *his* car? The explanation followed when, whilst waiting to see Julia, he went to the scene of the accident.

He found a blue saloon lying on its side across the road, and

a lorry entangled with it. It had been a head-on smash at the cross-roads, not far from the hospital. And just beyond the cross-roads was a small and lovely Tudor inn with a sign waving outside it: Felpdown Arms. Next door to this was the one and only garage of the district. This garage had already sent a breakdown lorry to the scene of the smash. They were working on it when Bill reached the spot.

He gave one shuddering look at the twisted car in which Julia might so easily have lost her life, and spoke to the man from the garage. And this man, by nature talkative, only too eagerly poured a lot of information into Bill's ears which he did not want to receive, but must listen to, perforce.

He had heard the smash and the cries, the man said, and rushed out of the garage. He couldn't believe his eyes. The car had been in his garage all night, and the couple had only just left the inn. A nice-looking gent and lady they was, too. They was staying at the Felpdown Arms and was just pushing off back to London. Rotten luck meeting that lorry. Of course it was the lorry-driver's fault. Hogging along, and there was a blind corner there with a clump of trees. He was always towing in wrecks from that corner, he said. Time they put a man on point duty. The lorry driver was cut about the face with flying glass from his windscreen, but there he was, sitting on the side of the road, smoking. He had refused to go off in the ambulance with the lady and gent. They'd both been knocked unconscious.

It was rumoured that they wasn't really married, the man said, because the lady had been identified as a Mrs. Daunt, and *his* name was Bent. "Another of these little romances, eh," the man added with a knowing wink, which made Bill squirm.

A few more remarks like that and Bill Daunt's face grew grimmer and whiter and his heart sank to the lowest ebb. He could not really take in all the man was telling him. He could not believe it. Julia *couldn't* have been staying at the Felpdown Arms with Ivor Bent. That must be a mistake!

But there was no drawing back now, and no use building

up false hopes. Better get this thing straight, and at once. So he left the man with the wrecked car, and drove to the Felpdown Arms. A few words with the proprietor, a rather pleasant ex-army major who had just bought the place, put the final nails in the coffin so far as Bill was concerned; closing down the lid upon any happiness he had ever known.

"The couple" in the blue saloon in that smash had stayed at the inn last night in a double bedroom and signed the register as Mr. and Mrs. Bent. No attempt to conceal *that* name. There it was. Mr. and Mrs. Bent from an address in London.

Bill Daunt went to the bar of the Felpdown Arms, drank two double whiskies-and-sodas, one after the other, then walked out into the sunshine back to the car, with the bottom knocked out of his world.

For Julia had broken faith, lied to him, deceived him. There might be an Aunt Agatha, in Godalming, but it was not with her aunt that she had stayed. It was with Ivor Bent at the Felpdown Arms.

At the same time he was surprised not only that Julia had wanted a lover, but that she should have taken one secretly. Why couldn't she have been straight about it? He had always thought her brave. She was courageous in so many ways, and he had believed her lacking in moral cowardice, in the insincerity of the average woman. Frankness had always been her strong point.

The more he thought about it, the more he tried to understand her need for another man in her life. Certainly he must remember that she had warned him when they married that she was not in love. But that couldn't excuse her for going behind his back and taking a lover secretly. She should have been straight about it. If she had asked him for a divorce, he would have given it.

Then he remembered that Ivor Bent was a married man. Well! That poor wretched woman, his wife, was in for something too—he could only hope she wouldn't mind as much as

he did. Maybe this wasn't the first time that Ivor Bent had let her down. But oh, Julia, *Julia*.

His cup of anguish filled to overflowing and he wanted to drive away from the hospital and leave Julia there—leave her to her lover. But there was something in Bill which did not allow him to clear out like that. Old habits, old ties, the old tenderness which could not be completely crushed at the first fell blow. He must see that Julia was all right.

He reached the hospital, walked in, and met Ursula Bent in the waiting-room.

III

There had been no premonition of active disaster in the heart of Julia when she left the Felpdown Arms with her lover and prepared to drive with him back to London. Nothing but a strange mixture of sentiments pulling at her, half of which she could not account for, even to herself. She felt so many different things. She was so glad because of last night, yet sorry because of it. Content that she could say: *"Now I have really lived and loved,"* and dissatisfied because the white shining page of the whole episode must needs be blotted by the fact that every word of it was written in dishonour.

She walked out of the pretty inn, leaving behind memories almost too poignant to look back upon. Her eyes were slightly ecstatic, yet she had a sense of futility. Queer, that futile feeling, and that "morning after" question would raise itself, unbidden, and refuse to be ignored: *"Was it worth it?"*

Ivor seemed to have no room in his mind for psychological doubts or perplexities. She envied him his almost pagan sensuality—his gorgeously unspoiled acceptance of everything.

When he was sitting in the car beside her, having made sure that the luggage was on the back seat and tipped the porter and slammed the door, he raised her hand to his lips, looked into her eyes and said:

"Now you are mine for ever."

Why, therefore, she asked herself, could she not be glad of

the fact that she had had this day and night when they had done such lovely things and had been such perfect lovers? Why could she not feel enriched by the store of memories which were hers to keep and make her indeed "his for ever" —long after they had said goodbye? His, mentally. There was so much to remember. The loveliness of yesterday in the sun-lit country. The tranquil beauty of the little Elizabethan inn. Of the long—yet swift-passing—night with a white moon pouring through the casements; of the unimaginable poetry and fire of Ivor's loving and of her own response.

Why should it all be spoiled for her, not only by the knowledge that her ecstasy was transient and that she could never repeat it, but by a queer sense of *disenchantment*.

Ivor would come up to any woman's expectations of a perfect lover. Nevertheless, Julia was aware of something lost, rather than gained. As though the looking-glass of illusion had been utterly perfect, but that by walking through, she had shattered the perfection of it.

She tried to tell herself that nothing is ever quite what one thinks it's going to be, and that it is a psychological fact that fulfilment, although sweet, is never quite as sweet as the anticipation of it.

Life did not allow one to be wholly, romantically happy, particularly in such a situation as this one. There was always the fear of discovery. How terrified they had both been last night because they thought they saw a mutual friend in the dining-room. She had felt quite sick with apprehension. And in spite of the fact that she knew they had both come away with water-tight explanations and good alibis, she could not prevent herself from worrying.

Would anything happen at home to make Bill get in touch with her aunt at Godalming and so find that she wasn't there? She had told him that her aunt was not on the 'phone, but he could easily trace her if he wanted to. Or supposing anything happened to Ivor's children, Flip or Ann-Louise, and Ursula wired to the friend in Gloucester? The friend might

stand by Ivor, but Ursula must inevitably discover that Ivor had not been to Gloucester at all.

All through that evening—indeed through the night—her heart had played horrid tricks with her, because of a footstep outside the door—or a bell—or a voice—the absurd terror that Bill or Ursula might arrive on the scene.

Such sensations were bound to take the sharp edge off ecstasy, because Julia was not, she discovered, a woman to embark upon this sort of adventure easily. In fact it had seemed much easier before she left "Katherine's", and joined Ivor. It had grown more difficult as the time went by.

There could be no end to the lies she must tell. True, she meant to stop at Aunt Agatha's house in Godalming, have a few words with the old lady, and so bring some smattering of truth into her conversation with Bill on the subject of the aunt. But lie she must, continually and consistently. And because of Bill's very faith in her, she would feel horrible.

To go straight to him from Ivor seemed, too, so detestable, that several times Julia wondered whether to make some excuse and stay with Vi to-night. Anything, so as to let a day and a night elapse between last night, and renewing the old intimacy with Bill.

This morning she asked herself whether she would want to leave Bill for Ivor, even if it was made easy, and the baffling answer flashed through her consciousness, almost without hesitation : *"No!"*

She would not leave Bill for Ivor Bent. Ivor was a wonderful lover, but too dominant, too exhausting, and—so she had discovered—neither particularly capable nor reliable. The brilliant painter and poet was really a spoiled, pampered child in comparison with Bill. She had not meant to draw comparisons, but had found herself unconsciously doing so.

In the little details of life, Bill never failed. Ivor, she realised, would be a complete failure without somebody to bolster him up. He wanted to stay in the clouds and let others help to keep him up there. She was surprised to discover how little

he really knew about looking after a woman. Perhaps Ursula "managed" too well and did not bother to let him take care of her. But Julia, used to Bill's solicitude, found herself missing it.

Right from the time they left London, it was she who had to take control. Ivor was a poor driver and it was she who discovered half-way to Felpdown when the car was going badly, that he had left the choke right out. She who suggested that they had better fill up with petrol, or be left on the road without it. She who had to find some silver in her bag to pay the man, at the pump, because Ivor had none and could not be bothered to change a pound. And later when the April night grew cold, she had asked Ivor if he had brought some shillings for the gas-fires.

"No, darling. I didn't think of it. So sorry!"

Neither did he think of ordering her other small things that she needed. Then when he unpacked, he found he had left his razor at home. He had come with a leaking bottle of brilliantine which ruined his dressing-gown. Julia had to clear up the case and use petrol to try to take oil stains out of the dressing-gown. Ursula had not packed for him, and he was quite incapable of packing for himself. That was obvious.

Everything seemed a bit messy. How could she help remembering the scrupulous order of Bill and the dozen-and-one things *he* always did to add to her comfort when he took her away for the night. And the blessed tidiness of him to counteract her own untidiness! She could see quite well that she and Ivor would never keep order or know where anything was from one day's end to another if they lived together.

It was all bewildering and a little unsatisfactory to the Julia who started away from the Felpdown Arms with Ivor Bent, that April morning. She could even feel a freakish disloyalty to her lover because she knew that she would be glad once it was all ended and she was settled at "Katherine's" again.

She even found herself harping on little domestic details. Had Bill's dinner been all right? Was Snoopy's eczema better? Queer how comforting they were, these silly little thoughts

about life at home. Nothing big and exciting about them like the memory of this episode with her lover. But they were really and truly the big things -the iron girders—supporting a woman's true existence.

Already the house of dreams which she had built about her lover was collapsing. That, perhaps, was what made her more than ever ashamed the belief which crept insidiously into her mind this morning that her feeling for Ivor Bent was not love but only a hot infatuation.

It being so, she would be all the more sorry that she had yielded to it. It just wasn't good enough when one had a conscience—and a husband like Bill.

After that chaos! The terrible suddenness of that car smash at the cross-roads before they were a minute away from the inn. That eleventh-hour accident which grimly destroyed all the alibis and explanations which had been made on both their sides.

The last thing in the world they had anticipated —the worst that could have occurred.

Julia, awakening to semi-consciousness and sharp physical pain in the hospital, felt that death could not have been worse than this. Death would have wiped it all out. But being alive, and knowing that the secret was out, that was real calamity!

She could remember little about the accident. She had had an instant's vision of the lorry descending like a juggernaut upon Ivor's car; heard Ivor cry out and her own voice calling as from a distance. Then a sense of being hurled into space and a total black-out.

Soon afterwards she came back to her senses, but only for a few seconds; once to find herself in an ambulance and to feel somebody applying something cold to her forehead; once in the theatre when they were cutting away her clothes, then they gave her an anæsthetic because she screamed with pain when they lifted her left arm, and had thought at first that it might be broken. Later, when she came out of the dope, it was to find herself in a women's ward—a small one, with only

three beds in it, and a nurse sitting beside her, holding a bowl in case Julia needed it. But she was not immediately sick. Her brain was clearing so that she was able to gasp out questions which the nurse answered with the diamond brightness of her profession :

"Yes, you've been in an accident . . . no, you aren't seriously hurt. Your left arm has a nasty cut and we've put six stitches in it and you've got a lot of bruises. You must have fallen on the back of your head. There's a nasty swelling there and I think that's what concussed you for a bit . . . no, Mr. Bent isn't seriously hurt either . . . yes, he's in the hospital. He isn't as much cut as you are, but he's making a lot more fuss. Men always do . . ."

The girl, well-meaning, chuckled.

"Now, don't ask any more questions, please, because you ought to lie still, *Mrs. Daunt.*"

It was the sound of that name which drowned Julia's relief that Ivor was all right, and set her heart racing horribly. *God!* then they'd found out who she was. Of course—they must have looked in her bag. She had been crazy to take her driving licence with her. That showed the little things that could give one away. It would have been all right if she had been brought here as Mrs. Bent. She might have got away with it. She could have explained the accident somehow or other. Had they done anything mad like sending for Bill?

The nurse soon destroyed Julia's last shred of hope.

"We've sent for your husband, Mrs. Daunt," she said brightly. "He's in the hospital now. Sister's just bringing him in."

"No—No—No!" thought Julia Daunt, and said aloud then: "Don't let him come for a moment . . . don't . . ."

After which she made actual and violent use of the bowl which the nurse smartly lifted for her.

Ten minutes later Bill came in. The nurse, with discretion, put a screen on either side of Julia's bed. The ward was not full. One bed was empty and the other occupied by a very old

woman who was asleep, therefore Julia and Bill were spared the feeling that this meeting was at all public.

What Julia looked like, she hardly cared. To Bill she presented a shocking sight. Her face was colourless, one cheek wore a bruise, already turning mauve. There was a bandage around her head, slightly askew, giving her a fantastic appearance. She was propped up against the pillows in the narrow iron bedstead. One arm was in a sling and heavily bandaged. There was a hospital dressing-gown around her shoulders. Her eyes looked enormous and full of an animal misery which made Bill flinch. He had never thought to see such a look in Julia's eyes. Just for a moment he forgot his own deeper hurts and, as he stood beside the bed, he regarded her with pity. She was so sadly changed from the lovely, radiant Julia whom he had seen off from Lewes station yesterday. Was it only yesterday? It might have been an incredible number of years. He said :

"I'm terribly sorry about this."

She thought she would die of shame and of distress as she looked up into his face. But she was quite clear in the head now, quite able to see how badly he had taken the knock. She whispered :

"So am I."

"Are you in great pain?"

It was so like him to show concern for her. She was touched and yet enraged by it. Why must he always be the decent one —why didn't he strike her across the face, even though she lay there, already injured? She wouldn't have blamed him for it. She said :

"No. Not bad. My arm's the worst. But they say it won't take long, as the wound's superficial and there are no bones broken."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Oh no, *no*," she said between her teeth.

He cleared his throat, coughed, looked away from her in an embarrassed fashion.

"I think they've got your luggage from the hotel. I'll send you in anything you need—I mean——"

She cut in, feeling his kindness whip her as no lash could have done :

"Don't be so generous to me. For God's sake say what you think curse me—I know you must want to——"

She broke off hysterically and bit her lips to fight back her tears. He was surprised. He had never known Julia to be hysterical. But of course he realised that she was still in a state of shock and not fit to deal with things.

"Now listen, Julia," he said. "This isn't the time for us to say what we want to each other. You've got to keep quiet. The doctor said so. I'll go home now and come back and see you to-morrow."

She did not answer for a moment. Everything seemed to hurt her; her head, her face, her arm, and something deep down within something not due to the motor smash. In a curious way she was suffering most of all because *he* suffered, and she was responsible—directly responsible. He had not mentioned Ivor's name. Had not referred to the position. But he knew. He looked years older. He looked as though he could never smile again.

The terrible part to Julia was that nothing could undo what had been done—that no amount of remorse or regret could wipe out last night and its significance. Her sense of impotence was appalling. The tears began to flow down her cheeks again. She said in a choked voice :

"Don't go. I want to talk to you. I want to tell you that I didn't want you to suffer . . ." She broke off, incapable of further speech.

Then some of his resentment broke through, and Bill said in a voice which she had never heard from him before :

"You weren't in love with me when we were married. I was a fool to take the risk. I see that now."

Something like terror seized her.

"But Bill—if you could only understand——"

Again she broke off. She felt too sick and ill to argue. What she wanted to tell him was that she hadn't meant to smash up the whole of her life with him—that she had *wanted* to go back to him. Of course she could see that that was going to be the most difficult thing in the world to make a man like Bill understand. The psychology of it was too complicated.

Bill said :

"Don't worry, Julia. I'll set you free if you want to be free."

Then with her heart knocking, she cried out :

"I don't want to be. Bill, please don't look at me like that or feel like that. Oh, Bill——"

She broke off, in tears.

He gave her a quick look and wondered why she said that and what it all meant. Why should she be concerned about him? She was in love with the other fellow. He felt suffocated. He said :

"I must go. We can't possibly discuss things now. Try to sleep. I'll tell them to give you anything you need. I'll see if I can get you a private room."

Thinking of her again. Why did he worry whether she lived or died after what she had done to him? It was a very sick and sorry Julia who whispered goodbye and saw him go from the room. And it seemed to her that the world was all topsy-turvy and that everybody had gone crazy, and herself most of all!

She had taken what the gods offered and ought to be prepared to pay the price. Only she had thought she might be lucky like other women and get away with it. So she supposed, Fate had set out to teach her that one couldn't have one's cake and eat it. Well—why howl about it now? Why, when she had left her husband, preferring the embrace of another man, should she feel more tragic because the husband left her now, than worried about the condition of her lover who lay injured and perhaps suffering in some other part of the hospital?

It was reaction, of course. A complete and unexpected revulsion of feeling. She didn't want to think of Ivor or hear

about Ivor. She only knew a sense of complete and utter loss when Bill walked out of her room, and she pictured him driving back to "Katherine's" without her. How wretched he would be. How unutterably wretched! She had ruined him and herself.

As she lay there, her face screwed up, tears of weakness flowing down her cheeks, another heart-shaking thought struck her.

"Ivor's wife is with him."

Possibly Ivor's wife felt, as did Bill, that she couldn't even bear to stay and talk to the person who had betrayed her. Possibly they would both, in anger and righteousness, seek a divorce. Then there would be a double divorce and she, Julia, and Ivor would be flung into each other's arms. Yes, Fate might say:

"You wanted your night. You took it. Now you can have all the days and nights—*all* of them."

Something like despair settled upon Julia. She rang her bell. A nurse came in and found the patient with a high temperature and racing pulse. She found, too, that Mrs. Daunt's husband had left and driven away from the hospital and was not expected to return.

IV

Doctors and nurses told Ivor Bent that he, like his companion, had had a "miraculous escape". He believed them, but in his own opinion it was an escape from nothing—merely an entry into another kind of disaster. His own reactions to the crash at Felpdown cross-roads were worse than Julia's, because he was more hysterical. His actual injuries were slight. He, too, had been thrown on to his head and suffered slight concussion. The result was a badly bruised cheek, a blackened eye, and a deep cut in the lobe of the ear which had been stitched. But there was no hurt in the actual ear itself.

When he returned to consciousness, he was in such a state of nerves that he had to be given an injection. With the result

that by the time Ursula was allowed to see him, he was drowsy and monosyllabic; in no condition for a "show-down" as Ursula was quick to realise.

He lay white and ghost-like with his bandaged head and ear, one eye glowering resentfully up at Ursula as she bent over him. She knew that he was not pleased to see her and that his main thought was for Julia, the girl who had been with him. But Ursula was a determined woman, and having recovered from the first shock of this thing, she had formed one dogged conclusion from which she did not intend to swerve. Under no circumstances would she give Ivor a divorce -no—not even if he begged for it. She had lived with him, slaved for him, suffered for him all these years, and he owed her something now. He wasn't going to be allowed to leave her alone at her age, tired and *passé*, for a younger woman. Neither was he to leave Flip and Ann-Louise without a father, all of them existing on the meagre alimony which the law would allow them.

Despite what he had done to Ursula, she loved him still, though it was a bitter moment for her when she stood by that bedside, looked at his disfigured face, and thought about last night. But she thought, too :

"I'm not going to give him up, neither am I going to let there be any scandal which might hurt the children."

And that was what she told him. Those were the only words that she had for him, beyond her first exclamation of pity for his physical suffering. She said :

"You understand, Ivor, this has got to be hushed up. You've got to tell Julia Daunt that I won't divorce you, and when you leave this hospital you're coming back to the children and me."

He only half took in what she said. In a sullen, wretched state of mind and body, there was little fight in him. He grunted :

"Oh, all right. I'll come back. But for God's sake let me have some peace now, Ursula!"

She fought back her tears. Dear heavens! she thought, how she had loved this husband, this lover of her youth and father

of her children. And how wretchedly he had repaid her love! She supposed that she could not blame him alone. But Flip and Ann-Louise—they were not failures, poor little things. They were only just beginning life. There must be no divorce —no ruined home, or dragging along on twopence a week for them. She would fight to keep Ivor fight tooth and nail.

"Listen," she said. "Mr. Daunt's in the hospital and I'm going to see him before he leaves and ask him to help me to prevent any scandal."

Doped though he was, those words meant something to Ivor Bent. He felt a furious hatred against his wife. He wanted to scream at her, tell her to go to hell, and not interfere between him and Julia. He wanted to say that he wouldn't go back to her and the children, that he wouldn't stop seeing Julia, and he wouldn't do anything that he was asked. Yet something held him back. In a queer way Ursula had some kind of control over him when she chose to exercise it. Added to which he knew that he hadn't the means for a divorce and remarriage. There was Julia to be reckoned with, too. Lord alone knew how she was reacting to this disaster. He would have given anything to know what her husband felt about it, too. Probably like coming in and finishing him off, Ivor told himself grimly. Julia wasn't badly hurt, thank God. What she felt like, was another question. He knew that *he* was feeling like hell. He wished Ursula would go away.

She went away. Closing his door she walked along the white corridor, her face a study in misery but with a set purpose in her mind. She must find the sister who had first spoken to her in the waiting-room, and ask her if Mr. Daunt was still in the hospital. When informed that he had gone, she stood a moment, turning things over in her mind. She must see this woman's husband. *Must* see him. And she was going to see Julia Daunt, too.

The sister told her that Mrs. Daunt was far from well. "You'd better see her to-morrow, hadn't you?"

But Ursula was mulish. And her ordinary kindness was a

little hidden under her righteous indignation against this woman who had helped to wreck her life. She said :

"It's rather vital that I should see Mrs. Daunt to-night, sister."

The sister screwed up her lips. Of course it was common property in the hospital that the victims of the car smash were nicely tangled up in a matrimonial mess. If sister hadn't been so busy she would have been interested. A trifle primly she said :

"Well, you can just slip in and see her for a few moments. But don't keep her long."

She called a young probationer who was passing.

"Nurse Jones—take this lady to Mrs. Daunt."

"Mrs. Daunt, sister?" the girl asked inquiringly.

"Car casualty in this morning. Queen Mary ward."

"Yes, sister."

A moment later Ursula Bent stood at the bedside of the woman who had spent last night with Ivor. And she was astonished to find how little there was in her of gentleness or pity, just because the chic beauty that she had seen only once before—and then in Ivor's arms—was now a wreck. The bandaged head, bruised cheek, arm in a sling, fever-bright eyes—might have roused great compassion in the heart of Ursula at any moment but this—when she knew that Julia had helped Ivor stab her in the back, and poached shamelessly on her preserves. Julia had done her an unforgivable wrong. To the day of her death, Ursula knew that she would never feel harder or more unrelenting than now.

She was even glad when she saw the look of shame and distress that crossed the other woman's disfigured face at the sight of her. Faintly, Julia said :

"Mrs. Bent!"

"Yes, I've come to see you," said Ursula, "and I'm afraid not on a friendly visit."

Julia swallowed. She felt stupid. Horribly embarrassed. A temperature was making her head and eyes stab with pain

All her physical hurts were acute. But nothing seemed as acute as her mental suffering. The short scene with Bill had been bad enough, but the last thing she had expected or wanted was a visit from Ivor's wife. However, she supposed she deserved it—deserved anything that was coming to her. She tried to nerve herself to take her punishment.

"Please say what you want if it has to be said, at this particular moment," she forced the words from her lips.

Ursula gripped her bag tightly.

"The sooner we understand each other, the better. That's why I've insisted on coming in now. I'm sorry if you feel ill, but——"

"Don't let that worry you," broke in Julia grimly.

"I suppose you realise what you've done?"

Julia clenched her teeth.

"I do. And it would be absurd for me to say that I'm sorry."

Ursula began to breathe heavily.

"But you ought to be sorry you ought to be sorry for the rest of your life. You had your own husband. Wasn't he enough for you? Have you got to take mine as well?"

No answer to that. Only a vivid, painful colour surging over Julia's face and throat.

"I knew this would happen," continued Ursula. "I felt it in my bones on the day when I saw Ivor kissing you in our flat."

"I didn't know you saw . . ."

"Perhaps he didn't tell you. But I did see. And I told him he was not to meet you again, and he gave me his word that he wouldn't."

Another silence. Julia thought:

"Why did Ivor keep that from me? He never let me know that she saw anything or was in the least suspicious. That was mean of him."

"Ivor's an artist—temperamental," went on Ursula, "and weak. And you might have helped. Even if he was in love with you, you might have told him that you wouldn't see him any more—that it wasn't fair to me and our children."

"I did tell him that—believe me or not as you like—I told him that many times," said Julia. She loathed every second of this scene. She felt that this outraged, indignant wife was taking her great passion, tearing it into ugly, painful little pieces and strewing them in front of her.

"Then you were weak, too. But what about your feelings for your husband—haven't you any for him?"

"What I feel about him—can't concern you," said Julia.

"Very well, then let's keep to the part that does concern me. I suppose you intended last night to be a secret—neither of you meant it to come out."

"That is so."

"A rotten, mean, cowardly thing to do."

Julia shut her eyes.

"Go on," she said, "you have every right to say what you like."

"I don't want to waste time abusing you. I came here to tell you that I'm not going to give Ivor a divorce. I'm not going to set him free to marry you—no matter what you do. If you go away with him, you'll go knowing that you'll never be his wife, unless I die before you do."

Julia opened her eyes. She said :

"Mrs. Bent, even before the accident, I never had the slightest intention of going away with Ivor, except—for that one night. I swear that our idea was to have one night and never see each other again."

"A grand plan!" sneered Ursula. "Most romantic! And what a sense of honour and decency you both possess!"

Julia bore patiently with the onslaught.

"It's true, anyhow, that we didn't intend to go away for good, and I'm perfectly ready to give you my word that I won't see Ivor again, once I leave this hospital."

Ursula drew a deep breath. She passed a tongue over her dry lips. The pitiless gaze with which she had been fixing her enemy wavered and fell away. Well, that was an easy victory. She had not really known what Julia Daunt felt about Ivor

until this moment. But she had been half afraid that Julia might expect Ivor to take her away and marry her.

"You see," she said, "there are my children to think about."

"Yes. I know."

"Couldn't you have thought of them before?"

Julia made an exasperated gesture.

"I did! I did many times. You needn't think I'm absolutely devoid of decency. I hated the deception and the whole intrigue. I swear it. But I'm afraid I was in love with Ivor—that's my only excuse."

Ursula's face reddened, then grew pale.

"It isn't excuse enough, but I suppose what's done can't be undone, and it's no use crying about it now. I only ask you not to see my husband again, and to make your husband see, too, that there mustn't be a divorce—a scandal, because of my children."

Even in her own state of misery, Julia was conscious of the pathos about this woman's persistent love and thought for her two little girls. She wanted no divorce, no scandal, because of them, rather than herself.

Julia said:

"I don't think you need worry that my husband will divorce me."

"I intend to get in touch with him myself and ask him not to do so."

"As you wish," said Julia.

Ursula heaved another sigh. She felt that she had done what was required of her by Flip and Ann-Louise. She had lowered her own pride by coming here to see this girl who had been her husband's *paramour*. But she *had* had to make sure that Julia had no intention of inveigling Ivor into taking her away.

"I don't know how much you care for Ivor," she said, "but I don't think it can be much, or you would not have wanted to ruin him."

"I didn't want to ruin anybody!" said Julia desperately. "I'd give anything, anything for it not to have happened."

"Then I hope you'll tell Ivor."

"I've already promised you that."

"In which case," said Ursula, "there's nothing more for me to say."

Tears of weakness welled into Julia's eyes.

"I hope things will come right for you—honestly I do," she whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Mrs. Bent."

Ursula did not answer. With a cold: "Goodbye," she turned and walked out of the ward.

Julia lay with shut eyes, not bothering to wipe away the tears that rolled down her cheeks. She thought:

"It's queer how completely one can change inside oneself. This time yesterday I was insanely in love—prepared to go away with Ivor and take frightful risks—believing in my luck. And now I can't feel any emotion—any sort of love—only hatred of myself. I wish I was dead."

The nurses found her crying. They gave her a strong sedative to make her sleep.

Ursula left the hospital, and took the next train back to London. Back to the difficulty of facing the children, Mrs. Rogers' questions, and the loneliness.

Her first action upon reaching London was to put a telephone call through to the Daunts' house in Lewes. It hadn't taken her long to find where Julia lived. She got that information through the Robinsons' friend, Mrs. Mackenzie, who had first introduced Ivor to Julia Daunt. Ursula derived a slight acid satisfaction in the knowledge that she gave Mrs. Mackenzie a nice shock, too. Because she said, straight out on the telephone:

"Your friend Mrs. Daunt has been in a car smash with my husband. They're both in Felpdown Hospital! Rumours are bound to circulate, so if you can do something to help, I hope you'll do it!"

With which she had slammed down the receiver, because she was crying. But a moment later she was on to "Katherine's" and speaking to Bill Daunt, who had only just got home. To him she said:

"I don't know what you think, but I want this all hushed up and put right. I don't intend to take any action, and I hope my husband will be coming straight back here from the hospital. You understand that it's essential because of my children. I've seen your wife and she agrees."

There was a second's hesitation, and then came Bill's voice, very chilly, formal, but polite :

"Yes, I understand. As far as I am concerned I want no public scandal, and if, as you say, Julia agrees, there shall be none."

That was an overwhelming relief to Ursula. She drew a deep sigh. Woman-like, she wanted to continue the conversation, feeling that there should be some degree of sympathy between herself as the outraged wife, and Mr. Daunt as the injured husband. But she soon discovered that Bill was oyster-like and had no intention of discussing anything. With the same cold courtesy, he bade her goodbye and rang off.

That night, the telephone at Felpdown Hospital was kept busy, and the inquiries for Mrs. Daunt and Mr. Bent were continuous.

Amongst the many messages which Julia received, two were outstanding. One from Bill to know if she was better, which afforded her a forlorn comfort. One from a shocked and horrified Vi who announced her intention of motoring down first thing in the morning to see her. A lesser—ironical one—came from the aged aunt in Godalming who had read a local evening paper and had seen her niece's name in it, connected with the smash, and said that she would "call to inquire" if her rheumatism allowed her out.

For Mr. Ivor Bent, repeated telephone inquiries from his wife, and later from business friends for whom he had been doing work, which Ursula had had to postpone on his behalf. And the same answer went back over the wires from the nurse whose duty it was to give the reports to relatives and friends :

"Mrs. Daunt is fairly comfortable and improving."

"Mr. Ivor Bent is comfortable and showing improvement."

Both patients slept that night under the influence of drugs, and after the long rest, returned to more normal conditions. The first physical and mental shock decreased in both cases, although Julia was the quicker of the two to recover her nerve. But she awoke to a sense of the most utter dejection. A misery so obliterating that she hardly knew how to face up to it.

She was removed after breakfast to a private block in the hospital. Bill had arranged for her to go into one of the small, attractive rooms which had long windows overlooking the pretty gardens. From her bed, Julia could see the gay beds full of cottage tulips and flowering shrubs. There were flowers, too, waiting for her in the room. Roses and carnations and a bowl of fruit.

"Your husband asked us to get them for you," the nurse who had charge of the case told Julia.

Julia could only nod miserably and lie back on the pillow with a great lump in her throat. She wished Bill would not heap coals of fire upon her head like this. It made one feel too rotten—too ashamed.

She felt not the slightest consolation in the note which she received on her breakfast tray, sent from another part of the private block, into which her companion of the crash had been moved. A note couched in Ivor's usual extravagant terms.

"Can only see out of one eye, as the other's bandaged, so forgive writing, and oh, my lovely one, forgive me. You know I'd have gladly died rather than let you be hurt. But I love you madly—more madly than ever. As soon as I can walk, I'll come and see you. Ursula says that it's got to be hushed up, and that there's to be no divorce. What does HE say about it? Write to me. I'm in hell. I have only the thought of the night before last to live for. Unless you go on loving me . . . I shall want to die . . ."

And so on, until the writing grew so bad that Julia could scarcely decipher it. She tore the note into pieces and could

not bring herself to send an answer until a nurse brought a further frantic message from Ivor asking why she did not write.

Then, propped up by pillows, still aching in every limb, feeling sick and altogether out of sorts, Julia tried to write. But she felt that she was not writing to a lover—only to someone who had urged her to commit the greatest folly of her life, and in so doing, had ruined her.

It was just as though her passion for him had been wiped out by an invisible hand. In a day and a night it had gone.

The sweetness of it had perished in the shame of discovery.

She felt unable to cope with Ivor, besides which she had told Ursula that she did not want to see him again, and would not. She wrote :

"I have seen U. I have told her I will not see you again. For both our sakes I think we had better avoid a farewell scene. We must not see each other again, Ivor. I haven't talked to Bill yet, but I expect he'll come and see me to-day, then I'll let you know what he says. I thank God you are not seriously hurt. Forgive me if I don't write any more.

"Julia."

Ivor's answer was immediate and to the point.

"The moment I can walk I shall come to see you."

Julia did not even bother to write again to say *"Don't!"* She knew that he would come. That was Ivor. The complete egotist! Insensitive to anybody, anything but his own need to see her, try to tear her in pieces again. He would come!

Her first visitor was Vi Mackenzie, driven down from town by her chauffeur in Mac's fast Aston. A Vi with little of her usual vivacity and humour, shocked into solemnity by the sight of her friend. Vi had never seen anybody look so wretched as Julia. When Vi said so Julia admitted her wretchedness, but assured Vi that physically she was not as bad as the

bandages and plaster made her look. The doctor who examined her this morning was quite sure that the cut on the arm would soon heal.

But she was still so weak that she collapsed into tears when Vi sat down beside her bed. With Vi holding on to her hands, the story of that one mad night was disclosed, and with it, Julia's feelings about the whole affair.

"It may seem incomprehensible to you, Vi," she finished. "You may think that if I was enough in love to go away with Ivor, I would stay in love, and I thought so too. I thought that long after I'd gone back to Bill, I'd love Ivor. I don't understand myself. But it's just as though I'd been struck by lightning. I've withered up. The side of me that loved Ivor has died completely. I don't even want to see him again."

Vi nodded.

"I think I do understand, Ju," she said. "You see, my dear, it's like the title of that silly film that George and I saw that night. *'It wasn't love.'* It just wasn't—but that's happened to so many people. You're not the only one."

"I knew it as I got into the car on my way home before the smash."

"My poor darling! That smash was the most damnable thing. Just *the* most appalling piece of luck. So many women have got away with it. Why shouldn't you?"

Said Julia grimly:

"I didn't deserve to, I suppose. I didn't really love Ivor and I've never loved Bill enough. And so the gods decided to pay me out."

"You say Ivor Bent's just as much in love as ever?"

"Yes. But what's the use of that? Unless Bill forces me into a divorce—oh, and even if he did, I don't think I'd marry Ivor."

"What's Mrs. Ivor Bent say?"

"Oh, she came and put me through it, all right. She wants to hush it all up."

Vi dropped Julia's hands, took off her horn-rims, and

polished them vigorously, her red lips drawn into a tight line.

"Bill's darn well got to do the same. There's no object in having any fuss and publicity about this. You just tell him what you've told me, and if he cares twopence about you, he'll wash it out. Besides, he's partly responsible for it -he *made* you marry him in the first place."

Julia pressed the tips of her fingers against her bandaged, throbbing head.

"I hope he'll feel that way. Funny that it should have taken all this time to make me see how fond I was of Bill. Oh, I know human nature's perverse and that I'm a mass of inconsistency, but——"

"Not at all," interrupted Vi. "It's perfectly logical. You wanted to have a real experience and it might have done you good if this accident hadn't happened to give you away."

"Which only shows that one can't afford to take risks. I said so. I said so again and again to Ivor and myself. And I know now how right I was. You can't be as selfish, as greedy as that, and not expect some sort of reaction on yourself. And Vi, I'm perfectly genuine when I tell you that I don't mind anything so much as I mind having hurt Bill. If you'd seen his face yesterday——"

She turned from her friend and looked out of the window. A white-capped nurse was walking past. The figure was distorted, because Julia's eyes were blurred with tears.

Vi took Julia's hand again and pressed it.

"Don't upset yourself, darling. It'll come right. I'll see Bill for you if you like."

"No," whispered Julia, "I'll see him myself."

A nurse came into the room and said :

"Your husband's here, Mrs. Daunt."

Vi sprang up and seized her furs and her hat.

"There he is. I'll drive off and come back later and see you after you've seen him, shall I?"

Julia whispered :

"Please."

Then Bill was with Julia, sitting in the chair where Vi had been sitting. A Bill as strange and unrecognisable and unapproachable as the one who had spoken to her on the morning of the smash. Only he seemed paler and grimmer than ever and there were black shadows under his eyes. She knew that he must have spent a bad night.

He brought a suitcase.

"I packed some things for you."

"Thank you," said Julia in a small voice.

He avoided her gaze. He seemed embarrassed by his wife's unfamiliar appearance, bandaged and huddled against the pillows. She looked so very young with it all. Her meekness hurt him too. Once he had loved the pride and spirit of his Julia.

He said awkwardly :

"Alice was very upset to hear about the accident."

She stammered :

"Is it—in the papers?"

"Yes," said Bill, "but only a paragraph. It merely says you were involved in a smash. Nothing—incriminating."

What there was to be seen of her face turned crimson.

He said abruptly :

"Do you want your freedom, Julia? I've been thinking things over and I realise that I've no right to turn round like any ordinary husband and condemn you for taking a lover. I seem to remember that just before we were married, you asked me if I was willing to risk you falling in love with somebody else."

She nodded miserably :

"Yes."

"Well, you must have had a premonition," said Bill with a short, unhappy laugh. "And there it is. I took the risk and I lost."

"Oh, Bill," she said, "try to believe that I am so terribly grateful for all your goodness to me and that I have been absolutely happy, but——"

"I don't think 'absolutely' is the word, surely," he said with gentle irony.

"Perhaps not. But I *was* happy. And then this came into my life and——"

"You fell for it," he finished for her bitterly.

"You'll never know how hard I fought ——"

"I don't want to hear," he said. "It's not a pretty thought —that you were fighting down your passion for another fellow while you were living with me, but the least I can do is to offer you a divorce."

"I don't want one," said Julia frenziedly.

"Neither does Bent's wife. And as she's got children"—Bill shrugged his shoulders—"all right, there'll be no divorce."

That made her almost sick with relief, but she was miserable in the knowledge that she could not wipe out the fact that she had betrayed him, and that she had destroyed his faith in her.

Bill said:

"There'll be no publicity and no fuss. But I quite understand that you can't want to live with me any more. I made a frightful fool of myself imagining that you were happy."

She wanted so much to repeat that she had been happy, and that her feeling for Ivor Bent had been mad infatuation.

He accepted his share of responsibility over the catastrophe. He admitted that she had a right to take a lover if she wanted one. But that could not prevent him from despising her.

He was so formal and non-committal.

"Look here," he said, speaking as though he found it an effort. "I take it for granted that since you went away with this man, you don't love me any more. We're agreed there isn't to be a divorce. But there can be no question of *us* living together in future. That's all over."

Julia was as white now as her bandages.

"Don't you want to live with me any more, Bill?"

"No," he said, "I don't think I do. And you can't want me to."

She looked at him speechlessly.

He no longer wanted to live with *her*. He said so.

She was too ashamed to hold out a hand and beg for his forgiveness. Somehow it wouldn't seem decent just now.

"I suppose this has wiped out your affection for me, Bill?"

He refused to look at her.

"I don't know. It's been a terrible shock."

"I can only tell you," she said, "that I wish to God it hadn't happened."

He looked and felt bewildered.

"Why couldn't you have been honest with me? Why didn't you tell me at once instead of going behind my back?"

She pressed both her hands against her eyes.

"Because I didn't want to hurt you, Bill."

His lips twisted.

"You were wrong. It hurt me a damn sight more finding out this way."

"Perhaps I realise that," she whispered, "but it's too late."

"Much too late," he said. "It's done, and nothing can be the same again."

That went like a knife into her heart. The tears started to come again weakly, and rolled down her cheeks.

"Whatever you think of me, Bill, try to believe that it was a sort of—madness. And that I'm terribly sorry, and always will be."

"Please don't apologise," he said in the stiff, cold voice that he had been using all through the discussion. "I ought to say that I am terribly sorry that I forced you into marriage with me. Mine was the original mistake."

She shook her head.

"Not such a big one as I've made."

His face looked curiously sullen. He said :

"Well, I suppose I can't say that I've lost you. Apparently I never really possessed you."

She kept silent. She felt, somehow, that Bill was arguing almost entirely on physical lines. That it was the physical

infidelity that mattered so much to him, and the fact that she had preferred another man's embrace. That overweighed all the mental part of it all the real affection and friendship that she had given him. She wondered if he would always feel like that. She was wounded, yet not astonished, by his hardness. She had always known that there was a hard streak in Bill. And no matter how much he blamed himself, he could feel nothing but raw resentment against her. That night with Ivor had hit so badly at his pride.

She said :

"What are we going to do?"

"I'll have to think it out. Perhaps I'll go away somewhere. I'll write to you. Anyhow, as soon as you're well enough, you'd better go back to 'Katherine's'. I'll put it on the market, but it won't be disposed of for a bit, and as long as it's mine, by all means live there while you're making other arrangements."

Her heart sank to its lowest ebb. Sell "Katherine's"! And Snoopy, Jealous, the kennels, everything would have to go! What an awful thought! How he must dislike her if he felt such an active reluctance to live with her any more.

"So," she whispered, "it's to be—separation, Bill."

"I feel it's the only thing, Julia. And you'll be happier if you can live an independent life. You can consider yourself as free as you wish, even though there is to be no divorce."

Suddenly terror seized her. Pride was swept away by the despair that came upon her when she realised that Bill was adamant.

She sat up and stretched out a hand to him.

"Bill, Bill," she said in an agonised voice, "don't go out of my life. Bill, can't you be a little more understanding —"

She broke off, trying not to cry. But somehow the appeal from her, instead of moving him, had the reverse effect. It infuriated him. There was an almost ugly look in his eyes as he looked at her.

"Understanding!" he repeated. "Good God—what do you

want me to understand except that you went off with this fellow behind my back because you were bored with me and wanted a new thrill!"

She covered her face with her hands. She could not bear him to look at her like that.

"How hard you are!" she said in a muffled tone.

"What do you expect?" His voice was rising. His own savage misery and outraged honour were rising in him, making him a man she did not know—a stranger without the gentle and kindly qualities that used to belong to Bill. It was as though a sort of disgust of her had suddenly come upon him, making him almost hate her.

"What do you expect?" he repeated as she kept silent. "That I should just smile and say: *'Well, well, how amusing! Did you enjoy yourself? Was he a good lover? Tell me all the details . . .!'*"

"Stop, for God's sake!" she broke in, and burst into tears.

He went on:

"I tell you I'm not the sort of fool who can do that sort of thing. You've made a mistake in your summing up of my character if you think I can forget what you did to me, Julia. Even if you weren't in love with me when you married me, you needn't have gone away with that damn fellow behind my back. You might have warned me. You might have——"

He broke off, shaking, and put the back of his hand against his lips. The veins in his forehead were standing out. It was as though he was convulsed with a passion of jealousy and fury. Julia hid her face in the pillow, dumb with pain. She thought:

"I've done this to him."

Then she heard his voice, quiet, even a little ashamed.

"Sorry. I lost my temper. I'll write to you. Goodbye."

She sat up and called his name:

"Bill!"

But he had gone and the door closed behind him. She turned her face to the pillow again and began to cry.

CHAPTER VII

I

THE first of the two victims of the Felpdown car smash to leave the cottage hospital was Julia. Not because she made the quickest recovery, since actually the cut on her arm was worse than any of the superficial wounds which Ivor had received. But she felt that if she remained in that hospital where she must lie thinking, by herself, she would go mad. Before she was really fit, Vi and the kindly Mac and their chauffeur came down in the Rolls to fetch Julia. The nurses dressed her. The Mackenzies were driving her up to London to their house in Kensington.

Ivor insisted on seeing her before she left her room. He limped in on a stick. He seemed ill. He was ghastly pale, with deep circles round his eyes. Bits of plaster, and a bandage here and there.

He sat down beside Julia on the bed. He said in a low, emotional voice :

"Oh, my poor sweet !"

She did not answer, but turned and looked at him long and earnestly. She was astonished to find how little the sight of him moved her, except to embarrassment. It did not seem to her that this Ivor was the man whom she had loved so frantically, and in whose arms she had tasted brief and shameful ecstasy. He was a stranger. Her physical passion for Ivor Bent was dead. As fiercely and swiftly as the flame had burnt up, it had burnt out.

"Why were you going to leave the hospital without seeing me? Do you hate me so much?" he asked.

"I don't hate you at all."

"Yet you were going without seeing me, and you knew that

I wanted terribly to see you. I've tried, but they wouldn't let me because I was feverish. How could you be so cruel?"

"I'm sorry. I thought it best, Ivor. I saw -your wife. I promised her that I wouldn't—see you again."

He put his stick down and took one of her hands with his. Unwillingly she let him hold it. She wanted to tear her fingers away. Her feelings were all confused. But the fact that she did not love Ivor now was remorselessly clear.

"And did that promise to Ursula mean so much more to you than all the promises you made me?" she heard his reproachful, tender voice.

"Oh, Ivor!" she said, and there was frantic appeal in her voice, in her eyes—appeal for his understanding—"It isn't that. But it's all so different now."

"Nothing's different between you and me, except that we've been found out."

"But that's made all the difference—Ursula knowing—Bill knowing."

"It should have brought us nearer. The accident was a frightful shock and we never intended to be found out. But since it's happened, it's made our way so much clearer."

"How?"

"It's obvious that you've got to go away with me now."

The faint and dizzy feeling that she had felt when she first looked upon him, seemed to vanish. The pounding of her heart quietened down.

"No, Ivor, I can never do that."

"But why not?"

Ivor stared at her.

"So that's how you feel! You *want* me to go back to my family."

"You know I never asked you to leave them permanently. And you know that I'd never, never have gone away with you even for one night if I'd thought that ghastly accident would happen. Can't you see how awful it must be for Ursula—and for Bill!"

"Well, what about us?"

"I don't care about myself."

"Then you might consider me," said Ivor in an injured voice. "I've been through hell. Don't you love me any more? Have you stopped loving me! I'll never believe it. Never!"

He took both her hands now and kissed them passionately.

Julia sat cold and still. Dead, dead was that passion which had driven her to such mad folly a week ago. Faintly she pitied this man who appeared still to be in love with her. But it was a pity tinged with contempt. He must be the central figure in a big scene.

His selfishness—his complete lack of compunction about his wife and family—had, perhaps, gone a good way towards causing her complete revulsion of feeling towards him. She found it hard to forget the way Ursula had spoken of the children. Everything had been "for the children". Poor wretched Ursula! She must have been through hell.

Physically, Julia was so weak that she was unfit to cope with a "scene". And mentally she was so tired that she could not begin to talk sense. But she knew she would never make Ivor understand what she felt. The one consistent emotion in her, was her agony of remorse for what she had done to Bill. She would have given anything, *anything* not to have struck at the roots of his belief in her and destroyed them so utterly.

Ivor was still pleading with her, covering her hands with kisses.

"You do still love me, Julia, my sweet—don't you?" he kept asking her.

"Ivor, you have no right to ask me that now. It's over—done with. We've made a mess of things. We've both hurt two people terribly. We can't go on talking about *love*."

He drew away from her.

"My God, you have changed."

She stood up. Her heart began to pump again.

"Ivor, won't you please try to *understand*, and let me go quietly—let us remember each other kindly." She broke off,

shaking her head in a hopeless way. She knew he would never understand. He only wanted a fresh drama. Wild tears, passionate embraces, complete surrender to self again. But that was all past for her. She couldn't bear to go through any of that again. It was ended.

Ivor Bent looked gloomily at Julia's back, and read what he thought to be a mulish obstinacy in her. He felt thwarted, furious with her because she had removed herself and her emotions so far from him.

"So it's to be goodbye, Julia."

She did not have to answer. She had never been more grateful in her life to Vi than now, when she arrived.

"Sister says you've talked quite long enough and that I must take you home."

Julia put out a hand and clung to her friend's arm. She was trembling and in tears. She whispered a barely audible: "Goodbye Ivor—good luck!" and walked from the room. Over her shoulder Vi Mackenzie flung a look of scorn at Ivor Bent.

A day later, Julia, installed in Vi's house, and still in bed, received a note from Ivor:

"I thought once that you loved me. I had hoped that calamity might draw us nearer. But I know now that it has driven you away from me and that you wish to take yourself out of my life for always. You don't know how I suffer. I try to think of others, but I can think only of you. My sweet, won't you let me see you again? To me you are still the little girl with the tangled hair and the fruit-stained fingers. Still the woman I love. I will take you away if you will come with me.

"Ivor."

She tore the letter into little pieces. It meant nothing.

She wondered how he could be so horribly ungrateful to Ursula who had taken him back. If only Bill had said: "I'll take you back, Julia . . ." what an immense difference it would have made to her now.

But Bill had only written once again, a formal letter to the effect that he was putting "Katherine's" in the agents' hands, and wished her to know that she might live there until it was sold. He was being generous about money. A thousand pounds —half his annual income—was to be paid regularly into her bank. He had always been generous.

She had written back to him at his club, telling him that she would agree to any of his suggestons. Everything in her ached to write in a different strain, to say :

"Don't go away. Don't leave me alone. I'm so sorry— Bill I want to spend the rest of my life making up for it."

But she had made one appeal to him and been turned down and she felt that she could never make another. He was so disgusted by her behaviour that he did not wish to live with her any more. She schooled herself to accept that. But in process of the schooling, something seemed to shrivel up in her, and she came out of the hospital with a veneer of hardness which was a form of self-defence. A cool, cynical Julia who said :

"I don't care. Nothing matters now."

And under the crust she cared, and knew that everything mattered desperately.

That first night at the Mackenzie's, Vi came to sit with her and they talked things over. Vi had been worrying about Julia all day. And her affection was coupled with remorse because she felt indirectly responsible.

Never had Vi felt more unhappy than when she looked at her friend and saw the change in her. A change both mental and physical. The head bandages were off now and the tobacco-brown hair was rough and in need of setting. There were still faint discolorations on her cheek. Her pallor was startling. Her eyes looked enormous and wounded. It hurt Vi to look into them. Her left arm remained bandaged, but

the doctor had said this morning that the cut was healing nicely and they would be able to take the stitches out in a day or so.

"You must stay with me as long as you wish, darling," Vi told her. "My home is yours and always will be."

"It's grand of you, Vi," said Julia. "But I can't stay too long, my dear. I've go to go down to 'Katherine's' and -and collect my things."

Vi winced.

"You'll hate that."

"Loathe it!"

"If only it hadn't all happened, Ju!"

Julia gave a short hard laugh.

"It wouldn't if I hadn't made such a damned fool of myself!"

"Julia, all day I've been telling myself that it's half my fault. I introduced you to that man. I went out with George and left you alone that night, and——"

"Oh, don't be an idiot," broke in Julia. "It's nothing whatsoever to do with you. I might have met him anywhere, and anybody might have left us alone. You can't possibly blame yourself for *my* imbecility."

Vi, half lying across the bottom of the bed, put out a hand and smoothed the green satin quilt.

"I believe you almost hate Ivor Bent now, Julia."

"It isn't exactly hatred. It's just—nothing. I remember the affair rather as a fascinating nightmare. Of course I never loved him –I only thought I did."

"It was much too rapid, my dear."

"Don't let's talk of it," said Julia in a low voice.

Vi drew a deep sigh.

"I wish Bill hadn't gone off and left you alone."

Julia's eyes looked bright and flinty, but her lower lip trembled a little. She said:

"I wish he hadn't."

"God knows why good men must be so hard."

Julia lit a cigarette and smoked hard for an instant, then said :

"He's being very magnanimous. No divorce. Half his money. It's just that he doesn't want to live with me any more."

"Oh well," said Vi gloomily, "I think it's very shortsighted of Bill. You're not really fit to be alone."

"Bill looks upon me as the sort of woman who doesn't need looking after."

"I think it's too tragic," said Vi, "that it takes this sort of disaster to make a woman really appreciate her husband, you poor darling."

Julia opened her eyes and sat up, two red spots on her cheeks.

"But it's not only poor me. It's poor Bill. Don't you see that three-quarters of my agony of mind is because of him? He's somewhere by himself, going through hell. And it's I who've done that to him !"

Vi said :

"Julia, darling, if he knew you felt like that—surely he'd give you a chance? Let me see him——"

"No, no, no !" broke in Julia. "You can't do that. I don't want you to."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take a flat somewhere, I expect, and lead a gay life," said Julia, with that laugh which Vi hated to hear. "I can't sit down and moan for the rest of my life. I must just get what I can out of it."

Vi looked tragic.

"Julia, it won't suit you to live alone and tear round to a lot of parties."

"No, but it'll pass the time. And think what a lot of time there is to get through. I've finished with falling in love, I can tell you . . ." Her face contracted. ". . . But I'm not thirty yet and there's the dickens of a long future in front of me. Days and nights, weeks and months, and years and years!

All by myself, spending all the money that Bill's allowing me and remembering that Bill's somewhere alone with his life ruined by me! *Won't* that be pleasant! *Shan't* I enjoy myself!"

She stopped. There was an ache in her heart which was almost more than she could bear, although her lips were grimacing into a smile. But Vi took off her glasses and hid her face in her hands and cried for her friend. Only the second time in her life that Julia had ever seen the cheerful, happy-go-lucky Vi in tears.

II

One month later Julia had finished her packing alone at "Katherine's".

Where Bill was she did not know. But he must still be in London. His letters were addressed from his club. Yet she could hardly imagine Bill in London at this time of the year when he had most liked the country.

In her bag lay a letter received this morning from Ivor. He was persistent. Almost every day he wrote. He was back at his flat with his family, and Ursula was being very decent to him, he said. But her magnanimity seemed to strike no grateful or kindly chord in him. It only irritated him. He wanted to see Julia, he said. He besought her to see him. He would go on writing until she answered.

Julia felt so tired of it all! She did not want to write to Ivor and less still see him. If only he would take "no" for an answer. Everything exhausted her. Somehow or other she was getting through the long days and even longer nights, when her pillow was very often drenched with bitter tears shed, not for Ivor, but for Bill.

It wasn't that any miracle had happened to make her yearn for Bill as a lover. All that had happened could not transfer her passions so rapidly from one man to another. Indeed, all passion seemed spent and dead. But she wanted Bill, the kindly husband and the good companion. The old peaceful days. She

could not bear to feel that all was over between them and they might never meet again except as strangers.

The garden, looking its loveliest, did nothing to comfort her. The beauty of it made her feel worse. The beds were gay with magenta-coloured wallflowers, with golden Siberians, and masses of tall Darwin tulips of every colour. There were the new deep blue forget-me-nots which Bill had planted along the bank by the gold-fish pond.

There, that special rare iris which he was trying out. Here, the new flaming pink azalea by the rockery, to which he had so looked forward, and which had only flowered a few days ago. But he was not here to see it. And that blue ceonothus, which had been his pride last summer, just opening its azure buds against the rosy Elizabethan bricks. Every morning Bill would have gone out to look at that, for he loved that particular shade of blue. In the herbaceous border the delphiniums were well ahead. Bill used to stroll out every night with a torch to see if he could find slugs. He had put little rings of lime around the plants, and fought his annual battle against leather jackets and the other enemies of the gardener. But he would not see the fruits of his labours.

Julia bit her lip until the blood came. She could not bear to look upon the garden. It shouted Bill at her from every corner. She loved it, but heaven knew he had loved it more. Wherever he was at this moment, she could imagine how he must think about it and wish with all his good honest heart that he was back again.

"It's too much," Julia said to herself. "Too much to pay for that one night with Ivor—too bitter a lesson to learn. Things were boring at times, other attractions seemed greater, but anything, *anything* is better than this hell!"

She wondered if things would have seemed any better if she had still been in love with Ivor Bent. But the answer was "No." No feeling for any man could overcome her remorse for what she had done to Bill, and for having risked breaking up this home.

Orchard, the old gardener, who had been Bill's right hand, came down the path with a wheelbarrow full of mown grass, touched his forehead and stopped to speak to her.

"When be the master coming down, mum?" he asked.

Julia looked at him sadly. Orchard, she knew, had been devoted to Bill. He had always said he had never worked under a gentleman who was more of a gentleman, and who wasn't afraid to do a job like any ordinary labourer. Many a hot day, Bill had shared a mug of beer with Orchard.

Julia said :

"I don't think he'll be coming, Orchard."

The old gardener wiped his head with a spotted handkerchief.

"That's bad, mum. I wanted him to see them lilies which he put in last autumn. They be fine and strong. 'Tis a rare pity you'm leaving these parts. And I shall be very sorry to go, mum, if you'll pardon the liberty."

Julia smiled. It was in circumstances like these that she either had to smile and be hard, or cry and go to pieces.

She said :

"I'm sorry, too, Orchard. But when we dispose of the property we'll recommend you highly to the new owners."

Orchard thanked her and went away. Julia listened to the rumbling of the barrow. Two tortoiseshell butterflies chased each other with delicate, swift movements, over the rosebeds. The sun beat down warmly on her head. From the house, Alice called that her lunch was ready. Julia turned and looked back at the single place set on the garden table, and had a swift vision of that other place that should have been set, and of Bill coming in, late as usual, wiping his hands and grinning apologetically, ready with the explanation of his latest achievement, some momentous task which he could not leave.

Julia pressed the knuckles of two clenched hands against her eyes and a sigh welled up in her that came from the very depths. She had a mad inclination to run into the house, sit

down and write to Bill, tell him exactly what she was feeling and say :

"Don't let's sell 'Katherine's'. Come back, oh, Bill, come back, and let's begin again."

But she couldn't do that. He would not want to come back, because of what she had done, and she could not have borne a refusal.

She felt helpless as though she was in the teeth of a storm against which she was powerless—a storm of her own brewing which must inevitably hurl her to final destruction. This lack of forgiveness on Bill's part was destroying her. She knew it.

She came to the conclusion that she must make an effort to save herself, as no doubt he was doing. She could never imagine Bill being broken, utterly, no matter what life did to him. He would suffer, but he would hold up his head. She was being a defeatist. That was weak. She had taken this risk and it was up to her to bear the consequences, no matter how they hurt. It was futile and foolish to sit down and moan. She had far better get to work to prove to herself that life still held something for a woman not yet thirty, in spite of this mistake.

Of course it was thought in the village that the car smash was responsible for things as they were, yet no one could quite understand why Mr. Daunt hadn't come down here with Mrs. Daunt. It looked as though there'd been some sort of row. Alice was sorry, and said so.

But Julia did not want to listen to any more people saying how sorry they were. She felt that she wanted to get away from everybody who had known her and Bill together. She would go up to London and find a furnished service flat. Then she would look up all her friends and acquaintances whom she had not seen for some time. There were dozens whom she had known as a girl. She would do all the shows and cinemas. She would get herself into a party for the Derby. She would make arrangements for Ascot and Goodwood. Oh, there were dozens of things that a young and attractive

woman, on her own, and with a thousand-a-year, free of income tax, could do.

Julia applied more rouge to her cheeks than usual. Made her lips vivid red, put on a smart suit and hat, and a little feverishly prepared for London. She must get away quickly from "Katherine's", the beloved and lovely home which was now full of ghosts to jeer at and torment her.

Before she left, something impelled her to go into Bill's dressing-room. She had not entered it since she came down from Vi's. But Alice had told her that he had telephoned and asked her to pack all his things and send them to his club.

The room looked empty and strange. Alice had folded up the rugs and put a dust-sheet over the bed. There was nothing left of the personal touch.

For a moment Julia thought she saw Bill standing there in front of the tallboy rummaging for a collar and tie, and shouting :

"Ju, darling, bring me up a gin-and-'It'."

She closed her eyes.

In a queer voice, half aloud, she said :

"I think, Bill, if you knew how sorry I was, you'd be sorry enough for me, to give me the chance that Ursula Bent has given *him*, and which he isn't taking, the fool, the *fool*!"

And suddenly a wave of hatred and contempt for Ivor came over her. She pulled his letter out of her bag and tore it viciously into hundreds of pieces and flung them into the empty grate.

Turning, she walked down the oak staircase into the hall. Outside, Orchard was putting her luggage on to the car from the local garage, which was to take her to Lewes Station. She could hear the Alsatians whining in their kennels. Perhaps they sensed that she was going away. Orchard had wanted to bring them out to say goodbye to her, but that she could not stand. The sight of Jealous, her favourite, with his reproachful golden eyes would have shaken her nerve and she wanted it now more

than at any time in her life. They were going to stay with Orchard for the moment.

Julia did not turn to look back at "Katherine's", although she knew perfectly well how beautiful it must look, the pinkish mellow bricks, the silver beams, the tall Elizabethan chimneys and diamond panes, drenched in the radiant sunlight. It always looked perfect on a perfect day of May. And she would never see it again, because she knew that she could never bear to come back.

She remembered that only a short month ago she had driven away from "Katherine's", fully prepared to risk losing Bill, and "Katherine's", and go to her lover. She dropped her bag in her lap, put her face in her hands and began to laugh.

"You're the fool, Julia Daunt," she said to herself, her whole body shaking. "You're the poor b——y fool if ever there was one in this world!"

And she went on laughing and laughing because she had no more tears to shed.

III

One afternoon in August, Bill Daunt returned from a trip to Norway and took a room at his club.

It wasn't the time of year to be in London. It was hot and thundery and Bill loathed town anyhow, yet knew not where else to go. He had no settled plans. He could not make up his mind to establish himself permanently in any one quarter. When Julia's affair with Ivor Bent had smashed up his life, it had smashed it in too many pieces for Bill to collect and put together easily. Indeed, by this time he knew that it could never be put together again. His interests had been so concentrated and rooted in his wife and home. The uprooting had not only destroyed his happiness and peace of mind, but disorganised his whole scheme of living. He might possibly look for a job.

He had known when he saw Julia in hospital, after the

accident, that he could not go on living with her because she had belonged for that one night to another man. He kept reminding himself that he had persuaded her to marry him in spite of her many refusals, and that he had no real right to imagine that she would never fall in love. But somehow he had *not* imagined it, or, in his vanity, he had hoped and believed that she would, after marriage, fall in love with him. But whether it was his fault or hers, the fact remained that she had committed an act of betrayal. That, he found hard to forgive. So he had thought it best to go abroad at once and had chosen the Scandinavian trip. He had always wanted to see the Fjords. He had attempted some salmon fishing in Norway, and later toured Denmark and Sweden.

He had hoped that fresh surroundings, a foreign country, might help to put him right with himself and deaden the pain that had ached unceasingly within him since he had discovered Julia's infidelity. Time worked wonders, and the travelling, after a fashion, had been a narcotic. But at intervals the pain had flared up brutally, shaking him to the very depths of his being. Intolerably he had missed his wife. And now that he was back in London, in a country so much associated with his old life with her, he knew that nothing could really put an end to that pain. He could not forget Julia. He might put her out of his life, but he could not put her out of his heart and mind. And through all his disillusionment, his sense of failure, there glowed the old steady love for her. That was fundamental. His memories of her were somehow never associated with the agony and humiliation of their final meeting. He remembered her only as the charming and satisfying companion of early days.

He felt that he had made a mistake in coming back to London, and yet he could not keep away because he was so truly British and his roots were in England. But now he found himself more than ever a lonely and harassed man, without ties or background, without the home life that he had so thoroughly enjoyed. He was utterly miserable at the

thought of "Katherine's", and how grand it would be down there just now. Amongst the letters waiting for him at the club, he found one from the agents to tell him that the cottage was still unsold. He had wanted rather too big a price for it. In a measure Bill was glad that it had not yet passed into strangers' hands. He had a secret desire to creep down to Lewes and take a look at the garden, and see all that had happened during the summer. There would be such a lot out—all the roses, and the loveliest things in the herbaceous border. Those stones which he had laid down would have mellowed by this time and should be looking grand.

How he had missed that place and his gardening. There had been times when he had wondered if he had not been a fool to separate from Julia. Why couldn't he have taken things in a "big way", as some men with different temperament from his own might have done. Men who were not so shocked or disturbed by the idea of physical infidelity. Julia had made it fairly obvious that that affair with Bent had been a flash in the pan, and no doubt she would have been willing to return to her old life. Yet when he thought about it twice, he realised that he could not go back. He could never forget that she went away with that damned artist. The very idea would be a living reproach between them.

But this separation from Julia was not making things much better, thought Bill. Physically, he was fit, but he felt wretched and very much alone. He wasn't good at making new friends, and it was difficult to see the old ones who had all entertained him with his wife. So embarrassing.

The first night back in London he found himself wondering how Julia was, and where? Had she been as lonely as himself? Had she suffered as much?

Just before dinner, in the club, he ran across Jim Robinson, who was a member of the same club, and who he and Julia used to see a certain amount of in the old days. The Robinsons had, in fact, Bill remembered, introduced Ivor Bent to Vi Mackenzie, and it was at Vi's that Julia had met Bent.

Blast him. If there was one man for whom Bill felt perpetual and unending loathing, it was Julia's lover.

Jim Robinson greeted Bill warmly and invited him to a drink. He thought old Daunt looked a bit thin and much older. Of course Jim knew about the separation. His wife, Doris, saw Julia now and again.

Jim Robinson was a bit of a gossip and it wasn't long before he was giving Bill Daunt a lot of news. News that Bill both wanted and did not want to hear.

He was told that Julia had a service flat in Knightsbridge, and according to Jim, was living her life pretty rapidly. Always at all the parties and shows and race meetings, and had recently been out to Tangier for a fortnight with some people called Bentlay. She was now in town again. Bill listened with a wooden face, staring at the floor, only lifting his head now and again to sip his cocktail. But his heart was thudding and he knew that he was violently interested in all he was hearing.

So Julia was leading a hectic life, burning the candle at both ends, was she? That didn't look as though she had retired into any convent to repent! Bill's knowledge of psychology was poor. He imagined that because a woman rushed from one party to another, she enjoyed herself. He knew the Bentlays. They had been friends of Julia's before her marriage. Lady Bentlay was a great party enthusiast and one of London's most popular hostesses. Much too sophisticated for Bill's liking. He used to think that Julia had found Monica Bentlay too frivolous, and that she had no use for Monica's crowd. But Julia seemed to have established herself in it now. Perhaps, Bill thought, fresh gloom descending upon him, Julia was sliding back into the life which she had always really wanted. Perhaps she had grown bored at "Katherine's", and bored with him because she wanted that other life.

He grew sick of hearing Robinson's accounts of Julia rushing round London, and went off to his solitary meal.

At the end of it he decided that he was a bit of a damned fool to be so exclusive and remain in pompous loneliness be-

cause Julia had ruined his life. Women, apart from Julia, had never really interested him, but he had had one or two friends in his youth. And there was one whom he had always rather liked, a girl who had married a pal of his and recently been widowed. He wondered what Marjorie Pryce was doing these days. The last time he had heard of her, she had shut down her London home and gone into the country with her small son. He decided to ring her up and see where she was now.

By a stroke of fortune, he found Marjorie in town. Her boy was in a nursing home having his tonsils out. Nothing serious, Marjorie told Bill on the 'phone, but she had to stay near him, so she had opened her London flat again. Life wasn't too happy for her. Of course she had the kid, but nothing seemed the same without Robin, the husband who had died. Bill sympathised. Robin Pryce had been his friend at school, and best man at his and Julia's wedding. He asked Marjorie if she would dine with him to-morrow and she accepted.

"I've got another date but I'll switch it over because I'd love to see you, Bill," she said, and added how sorry she was to hear about him and Julia.

Bill said :

"What happened to me's as good as, if not worse than death, my dear Marjorie. For Lord's sake come and cheer me up."

Marjorie Pryce was only too willing to try to endeavour to cheer Bill up. She had never seen very much of her husband's friend, but she had always liked him. He reminded her of Robin. They were the same type of man. Julia, she hardly knew at all, but she had heard plenty from mutual acquaintances, and took it for granted that Julia had just been a heartless little wretch, and that she ought to consider herself lucky that Bill hadn't divorced her.

Marjorie put herself out to be nice to Bill. So Bill, that following night, finding himself at The Mirabelle with an attractive woman of forty who had, herself, loved and lost

and suffered, felt some degree of consolation. Marjorie was well turned out, had fair, pretty hair and soft blue eyes. And a soft way of looking at and talking to a man. A little too soft, perhaps. Too much sympathy was apt to embarrass a man of Bill's temperament. But certainly it was much better than being alone. Not that it really made up for the loss of Julia in any way whatsoever. Julia was different from any other woman. The longer he lived apart from her and the more he saw of other women, the more Bill realised that. He missed that boyish, straightforward streak in her which had always made her such a fine companion for a man.

If he could only forget Julia!

He listened to Marjorie Pryce sentimentalising over her memories of Robin. Then she asked him if he would like to join her and her brother and little boy on a holiday in Devonshire, when Michael came out of the nursing home. Bill accepted, and then wished he hadn't. Marjorie was charming, but he didn't really want to go away with her or anybody. But he had to do something. It wasn't good for him to stay alone and indulge in a lot of useless regretting.

He wondered where Julia was this evening. Out with some fellow, probably, enjoying herself thoroughly. Jim Robinson had said she was having a hell of a time.

Curiosity pressed Bill hard — perhaps for the first time in his life. He turned the conversation to Julia.

"Have you heard anything about her?" he asked Marjorie.

Marjorie looked at him through a fringe of golden lashes.

"Quite a lot, as a matter of fact."

"What?" Bill tried to speak casually, but the hand carrying the cigarette to his lips shook a little.

"Do you think I ought to repeat——?" Marjorie broke off with a charming suggestion of reluctance to run down an old friend.

Bill said: "You might as well tell me what you know about her. I've already heard that she's enjoying life."

"Yes, I don't think you need worry about her. She has plenty of admirers."

That made Bill look at her sharply.

"Plenty or one in particular?"

"Oh, I don't think she draws the line at one."

"Does she see—Ivor Bent?" The name stuck in Bill's throat, but he got it out somehow.

"Well, you know one only hears things in a roundabout fashion," said Marjorie, secretly enjoying herself. "I met a woman the other day who knows the Mackenzies."

"Ah! Vi Mackenzie is Julia's greatest friend."

"Well, my friend said that Mrs. Mackenzie said that Julia had an awful scene with Ivor in the hospital before they left, and told him to go back to his wife, and stay there, which I believe he has done."

"I see," said Bill, and stared at the table.

"But there's a man called Aubrey something-or-other—I forget. He runs a road-house near Richmond. She's out with him a lot. And there's supposed to be a boy in tow—Timothy Corage—you know, son of Sir Simon Corage, M.P. for something ——" Marjorie was vague with her names. She added: "I did hear that Julia was rather thrilled with Tim. He's mad about racing."

"Julia always liked that," said Bill without much emotion in his voice.

But inwardly he burned with every kind of emotion, over which jealousy took precedence. Queer, he thought, that although he had done his damnedest to put Julia out of his heart and mind, he could still feel fury at the thought of her associating with any other man. He would never have thought Julia capable of racketting around town like this—getting herself such a reputation. Who was the man called Aubrey? And what could she see in a mere boy like Corage who, although he might be good at the races, had the reputation for drinking too much, was continually being fined for speeding and had, as far as Bill could remember, even run over

and killed somebody. He had escaped a conviction for manslaughter only because his father managed to brief the most brilliant counsel of the day to defend him.

Julia would soon go from bad to worse, if she interested herself in boys like Corage.

But why worry about her? Why care a *hell* what she did? Fiercely Bill chased away his jealous thoughts and paid more attention to the girl who sat opposite him. She was nice and she was good she had been faithful to Robin's memory. She was all that Julia might have been. *But, oh God! she couldn't be Julia!*

In the taxi driving back from Curzon Street that night he kissed Marjorie good night. Her lips were warm and eager under his own and he was momentarily stirred by the softness and allure of a woman who was obviously not averse to a little love-making. She was the first woman he had embraced since he had left Julia, that day, four months ago, on the station at Lewes when she went to her lover.

Bill cursed under his breath but Marjorie Pryce stirred languorously in his arms.

"Happy?" she whispered.

"Yes," he lied and kissed her a little more passionately.

But the ghost of Julia sat in the taxi with them, looking at him with her greenish eyes big and bright in the pale face under the fringe of tobacco-brown hair. And he wanted and hated her—both.

IV

Monica Bentlay's cocktail party was a success. Her lovely Mews cottage was full of flowers and full of people. *They* were full of drink, so the party was a success.

But Julia was hating it. Julia hated most parties these days, but went on accepting every invitation she received in a crazy and futile attempt to enjoy herself. Merely because within herself she had lost all sense of enjoyment. She could make

herself look attractive. She could gather a small crowd of men, young and old, about her if she chose. She could laugh at a racy story and drink as many cocktails as any other woman, and smoke as many cigarettes. And, at all parties, Julia, the grass-widow, was always a success. But the end of all such evenings was loneliness, and nothing really satisfied her.

There was the usual crush at Monica's party. Julia recognised most of the people. Some, whom she had learned to know rather too well during her fortnight at Juan-les-Pins. People who were supposed to be amusing. Women whose chief concerns in life were new fashions, new face creams, and new boy friends. Model girls, film-stars, T.V. personalities, journalists, and the hangers-on.

To Julia, who had lived for so long with Bill, and been brought up in a big country home, all these people looked tired out, and uninspired. But they lived rapidly and moved rapidly and that was what she wanted to do, because the moment she was given time to sit down and think, she was miserable. Miserable because she missed Bill and her old life. At times she wanted them unbearably.

She sat this afternoon on the arm of a chair in Monica's lounge, hating mass humanity on this hot summer's day and wondering why she had come. Nobody could make themselves heard. Everybody screamed at everybody else. Now and again a guest was brought to be introduced to her, and she found a momentary diversion, then the person was swept away again to meet and speak to somebody else. Nobody had anything of any real value to say, but a great deal of chatter went on.

"I adore your hat, Julia darling," one woman said, and asked for the name of the person who made it.

"You look too heavenly in black," somebody else said. "Where did you get your dress?"

She had a quick answer for everybody; derived a sterile satisfaction out of making the other women envious because she was expensively and perfectly dressed; flirted a little, but

very indifferently, with the men who pursued her; and gave the impression that she was a happy woman.

Then Doris Robinson saw her, pushed her way through the crowd, and came up and sat beside Julia.

"Are you going to be in town all the summer, dear? Or are you going away?"

Julia gave a non-committal reply. She did not really know what she was going to do. She was so tired of her furnished flat, and so lonely. Horribly lonely. It was hard to think that "Katherine's" was still for sale, and down there the garden would be so cool and lovely, green and fresh, and that last summer, Bill had been there with her and the dogs, and life had meant something. To-day it didn't mean anything at all.

Doris Robinson chatted on :

"I saw Ivor Bent yesterday—he was looking at a picture in Jeffress's Gallery, and I ran into him. He asked after you."

Julia did not even change colour. One small hand, holding the slender stem of a cocktail glass, shook very slightly. It was often shaking these days. She was living on her nerves. She slept badly, and she knew that she was thin, and drawn about the eyes. She never felt anything but exhausted.

"How was Ivor looking?" she asked in an even voice.

"Most attractive. I must say I think he *is* attractive. But I'm a little sorry for his wife. I think she gets a thin time of it."

"I think probably she does," said Julia in the same expressionless voice.

"You never see him nowadays, I suppose?" asked Doris curiously.

"No," said Julia.

Ivor had stopped writing weeks ago. All communication between them had ceased. She was not even stirred to a momentary thrill by the memory of him. What freakish tricks life could play upon one, she thought. Not so very long ago she had been unable to chase Ivor from her thoughts, and Bill

had ceased to exist in them. Yet to-day all thought returned persistently and tormentingly to Bill. She was always wondering where he was and what he was doing and how he was facing life to-day.

Doris Robinson offered a little more information, and then Julia stopped sipping her cocktail and came alive. A tinge of red crept into her hollow face.

"Jim met Bill at the club the other day," said Doris. "I wondered if you knew he was back in London."

"No. We—don't exactly have any correspondence with each other. How was he looking?" asked Julia, as though she didn't care at all. But every bit of her clamoured for news of Bill.

"He'd just come back from Scandinavia, and Jim said he looked thin and rather unhappy."

Julia stared unseeingly at the crowd. A man nodded and smiled at her. Mechanically she smiled back. And she thought:

"Oh, Bill, you can't be more unhappy than I am!"

Yet there was some degree of comfort within her to know that he looked unhappy. Somehow she would have hated it if she had heard that he was quite content.

Then Doris Robinson dispelled her illusions. Bill was not grieving for her. Doris said:

"Jim isn't the only man who's seen Bill. I've met one or two people lately who've run into him. He appears to be rather interested in a female named Marjorie Pryce. Have you heard of her?"

Julia stiffened and the colour left her face. So Bill was running around with *that* woman. Oh yes, she knew Marjorie who had married one of Bill's best friends. Robin had died a little while ago. So that was it! Bill was comforting Robin's widow, and she was comforting him.

"Yes, I know her. How amusing!" said Julia in a bright hard voice. "Do tell me more."

"I don't know any more, my dear, except that he's been seen about with her a lot. Rather fair and pretty, isn't she?"

"Charming, I believe," said Julia.

Doris Robinson eyed her covertly. She was a little sorry for Julia Daunt, and of course everybody knew the scandal about Julia and Ivor Bent. Rotten luck on them both, that revealing accident! She didn't think Julia looked too gay. And she'd soon be losing her looks if she got much thinner.

"I sometimes think," said Doris, "that you and Bill were silly not to get a divorce, and then you could both be free to marry again if you wanted to."

Julia had never much liked Doris Robinson, but now she seethed with loathing for her. Her heart beat very quickly. She put down her cocktail glass, lit a cigarette, gave a glittering smile and said :

"But you see we don't want a divorce, Doris."

And then she walked away and spoke to some man who was asking her what she fancied for the Oaks.

While she answered cheerfully, her mind was in confusion, and her heart torn this way and that. For, she was thinking, perhaps Bill *did* want to marry again. Perhaps he really was consoling himself with Marjorie Pryce. She wouldn't have believed it possible that Bill would find somebody else so quickly. God! he must have changed. Even more than she had done. For underneath she still belonged to him so completely, and it was as though she had never been possessed by Ivor Bent for a single night.

She had imagined Bill as lonely and unhappy. But he had Marjorie now—Marjorie who was pretty and charming, and the widow of one of his best friends.

A tall, thin boy, good-looking in a dissipated way, and with a red head which singled him out from the rest of the crowd, came towards Julia, whirling the stem of an empty champagne glass between his fingers. He wore a morning suit, and had a white carnation in his buttonhole. He looked flushed and festive.

"Julia, my sweet! I've been best man at a wedding and I'm worn out," he greeted her. "I'm looking for some more drink. But having found you, my thirst is quenched. You're far lovelier than the bride I kissed. May I kiss you?"

"Hullo, Tim," she said laconically, ignoring his flippant request.

He came to her side, took her arm, and pressed it against him.

"You look divine."

She laughed.

"I feel hellish."

"Then let's go out and have dinner somewhere and dance. I'm fed up with Monica's party. It's too divine for a time, but it becomes a bore with all these noisy people."

She moved away from him.

"I won't dine with you, if you don't mind, Tim."

He gave her a reproachful look. She looked back at him without a tremor. There was nothing in Tim Corage's bad blue eyes to stir her for a single moment. Ever since he had met her, out in Morocco, he had "fallen for her", in the light and artificial way that young Corage was reputed to fall. She knew that he was intrigued, because she was a young, attractive woman, separated from her husband, had a bright, hard veneer, which he found amusing, and didn't want him to marry her. He had pursued her for weeks without encouragement. But she was sure by now it was probably common talk that young Corage was her lover. It was not true. She hadn't a lover. And she didn't want one.

"I'm going home," she said abruptly.

"Let me come with you."

"Can't be done. I've got an aunt coming to stay with me."

"I bet!"

She gave him a hard, flashing smile.

"Dear Tim, you're so unbelieving. Anyhow I'm going home —and alone."

He looked after her retreating form and called out:

"It's only because you're so beautiful that I allow you to be horrid to me."

Another man waylaid her in the hall. Aubrey Pethick, late

of the Guards, now running a flourishing road-house just outside London. He was immensely popular—a cheerful, amiable man in the forties, with military moustache, and smart upright carriage. He had proposed to Julia a dozen times since he had met her. He thought her singularly charming, had a deeper respect and insight into her character than young Corage. He wanted her to get a divorce from her husband and settle down with him.

Julia liked him. She had had one or two amusing evenings with him, and some good week-ends, in a crowd, at his 'pub', "The Seagull", where there was an exceptionally fine swimming-pool.

Pethick had money of his own as well as the small fortune he was raking in as the proprietor of "The Seagull", which had become a very popular place for young people to drive down to in the warm weather and dine and dance and swim. No doubt she might have a very good time as his wife. But it had never once entered Julia's head to contemplate divorce from Bill, or marriage with another man.

Aubrey Pethick greeted her eagerly :

"Julia! Not just going, are you? I've only just arrived."

"Yes, I'm tired and going home."

"Oh, my dear, I am sorry. I was looking forward to seeing you at Monica's. I wanted to drive you back to 'The Seagull' with me for dinner."

Julia shook her head. She raised her eyes silently to his for a moment. The man looked back and read infinite weariness in those greeny-grey eyes which had disturbed his peace quite badly. He was really in love for the first time in his life. Julia was the one girl he knew for whom he would like to forsake his freedom. He said :

"You're taking things to heart too badly, Julia. Why not chuck it all and start again?"

"We've been over all that, Aubrey."

"Yes, but you can't go on alone being so miserable."

"But you've always said how gay I am."

"I know what you feel under the gaiety."

She patted his arm.

"You're a dear, Aubrey, and a good friend, but——"

"But you want me to leave you alone, eh? That's what you're always telling me. What luck I've had, falling for a woman who is still in love with the husband who has left her."

Julia winced. Pethick took her hand and squeezed it for a moment.

"Sorry, dear, but you know I'm much too damn fond of you and I think that husband of yours is a fool."

Julia said :

"You're wrong. I'm the fool. Good night, Aubrey. Ring me up sometime."

"Every day if you want me to," he said.

He stood looking after her regretfully, shaking his head. He growled under his breath :

"Any fellow be a damn fool to leave that woman. She's one of the best. If she'd been my wife I'd have forgiven her anything. Daunt's a prig as well as an ass."

With which thought, Major Pethick passed on into the crowded room in search of his hostess and a drink.

Julia took a taxi back to her flat.

She walked into the sitting-room and stood a moment looking around her. She took off her hat and threaded her fingers through her hair. How tired she was! How desperately tired of everything.

There were red roses on the table—sent from Aubrey Pethick this morning. On the desk stood a round golden box tied with a lavender-coloured bow. A box full of French liqueur chocolates. Tim Corage had brought them for her yesterday when he tried to induce her to drive down to Bray with him "for a little supper" he had said. Julia knew what *that* meant.

The engagement block on her desk was filled with dates. Parties, dinners, invitations which meant that she need never

be alone if she did not want to be. Yet never had her loneliness been more intense or her misery more extreme.

With the inevitable cigarette between her lips, Julia wandered disconsolately from one part of the small flat to another. She had never really liked it. This afternoon it appeared to her intolerable. London was intolerable. And so, with few exceptions such as Vi and Mac, her faithful friends, were all the people with whom she had been running round lately. She kept thinking :

"Perhaps Doris is right. Perhaps Bill and I ought to be divorced if he wants to marry again."

But oh! how she hated the thought of Marjorie Pryce! She wished she knew her better and tried to recall every little detail that she could about the woman. Fair, good skin, not a bad figure, and Bill had always said Robin was a lucky chap and seemed very happy. Then there was a small boy. Was Bill attracted by the thought of a ready-made son? Did he look upon Marjorie as a maternal creature and decide that he would like a new wife, a new home, and a son of his own?

Julia stood at the open window with the August sun beating down upon her and looked blindly upon the rooftops. She began to wonder if childlessness had been one of the faults of their marriage. She wasn't a particularly maternal type. And yet she had never actually rejected the idea of having a child. Bill just hadn't seemed to want a family. But now she wondered dismally whether she ought to have had one. Perhaps, then, she would never have known that fatal desire for a big thrill with another man and there would never have been an Ivor Bent and the subsequent tragedy.

For an hour Julia paced the flat, forgetting that it was past dinner time and that she was due at The Caprice with a party, until the telephone rang and one of the men in the party reminded her that they were all waiting for her.

She had a feeling that she could not face a public restaurant, or be capable of all that empty, bright chatter, and joking

with a lot of men who did not really care whether she lived or died. She said :

"I'm frightfully sorry. I'm not well. I was just going to ring up. Will you ask everybody to excuse me?"

After the formal courtesies and expressions of sympathy, she put down the telephone, sat at her writing-desk and jabbed her cigarette end almost viciously in an ash-tray. It wasn't an idle excuse. She did feel ill. She had felt so ever since Doris Robinson had told her about Bill and Marjorie Pryce.

She flung her head back and laughed aloud, but it was a bitter sound.

"I must be falling in love with Bill now—for the first time," she told herself, and went on laughing until she cried.

But that was a desperate mood which had to be dealt with firmly and got over. Somehow, Julia managed to recover herself and regain her poise, and be the bright girl she had made of herself, since her separation from Bill.

Of *course* she wasn't falling in love with Bill. She was just wounded and piqued because she thought he was interested in another woman. She was homesick for "Katherine's" and the country and the dogs. And she was just being a coward. Only she wondered how much more she must pay for that effort to spend one night of real romance!

She lay in a very hot bath and tried to steam the black misery out of herself, but even as she lay there, she thought of her old bathroom at "Katherine's". She would have given much to hear Bill knock on the door and tell her to hurry up, because he wanted the bath.

She thought :

"I wonder if he's going out to-night with Marjorie Pryce . . ."

The telephone rang.

Wearily Julia got out of the bath, and with a towel about her wet body, walked into the drawing-room and answered the call.

She had a shadowy hope that it might be Bill calling her.

Bill who was back in London. But of course it wasn't, and she laughed at herself for being such a fool. But it was at least one person in the world whom she wished to see and from whom she might derive faint comfort. Charles Holland, a doctor and an old family friend. He had once had an exceedingly flourishing practice in Leicester in Julia's childhood. He was now retired.

She had not seen Charles for years. Not since her wedding to Bill, which he had attended, and as far as she knew he had been out in South Africa for the last year or two.

"I've had a bit of a job running you to earth," he told her, "but I managed it. Only just back from abroad, my dear, and a bit lonesome. You know since my wife's death I've been wandering and haven't settled anywhere. But I'm going to get a place in Cornwall. I'm up in town for a few days before I go, and thought I'd like to see you."

A sudden rush of affection for the old family practitioner seized Julia. In her present miserable mood, the tears came easily to her eyes. She said :

"Oh, Charles, I'd love to see you ! Simply love to. How did you find me?"

"Through the husband at the club," he said.

Julia's heart jumped.

"Oh !" she exclaimed.

An instant's embarrassing pause. Then Dr. Holland added: "I think you'd better come and tell me all about it, young lady. Why are you two living apart? You've only been married five minutes."

Julia gulped.

"I—oh, it's a long story, Charles. I——"

"Come out and talk to me," he said.

"Would you like to come to my flat?"

"No. You sound as though you want cheering up. Put on a pretty dress and we'll make a night of it. How about the Savoy? Would you like that?"

She realised that she would like nothing less. She was so

tired of restaurants and dance bands and people. But dear old Charles still thought of her as a child who would be thrilled by an evening out, and he was old and lonely, and himself in need of being cheered. She arranged to meet him in half-an-hour's time at the Savoy.

She wore black. A slim sheath of a dress under a white brocade coat. When she looked at her face in the mirror, she was shocked by her own pallor. There were shadows under her eyes. She looked as ill and as wretched as she felt, and she wondered if Charles Holland would think she had aged considerably.

However, with a little skilful make-up and much brushing of the brown head, Julia was lovely enough to make men and women look at her twice as she walked through the Savoy to meet her host. And the said host, as he took her hand and looked down into her face, thought that the girl whom he had known since she was a baby, and who had always been pretty, amusing, and attractive, had developed into a truly beautiful woman.

There was real beauty in Julia's face now, maybe because it was tinged with sorrow. The eyes of Julia were the eyes of a woman who had lived. There was a new subtlety about her. Nevertheless, Charles Holland deplored that other happier Julia and was instantly afraid of this new one.

He was only with her for a few minutes before he realised how miserable she was and that because of it, she was putting up a bluff, encasing herself in armour in order that she might laugh and joke and say clever, cynical things. But underneath that armour, she was vulnerable to any hurt. That was dangerous.

A student of minds, as well as a healer of bodies, Charles Holland had not reached the age of seventy without learning a great deal about women. He understood Julia entirely. The story she had to tell him was by no means a complicated one. It was all so easy to comprehend.

Charles listened and grieved for Julia. But also for Bill.

For the doctor could put himself in her husband's place, and imagine how deeply in love Bill must have been, and how horribly hurt by her infidelity.

Julia finished her confession and said :

"I suppose you think I behaved like a little beast, don't you, Charles?"

He puffed at the cigar which he had just lit, then took it from his lips and looked at the end thoughtfully. He deliberated before he spoke. Julia's bright sad eyes watched him with some anxiety. She was so fond of Charles. She did not want him to condemn her too witheringly, and she knew that he was, and always had been sincere, and would be just in his "summing up" of the affair. Dear Charles! She had changed, he said, but he had not.

"Well," she said, "go on, Charles. Tell me you're disgusted and finished with me."

He said in a deep, gruff voice :

"Don't be a little idiot. I wouldn't feel that way no matter what you'd done. You'll always be the youngster that I looked after when she had measles and whooping-cough, and influenza, and who cut her head open when she fell off a tree, and had a stitch through her foot because she stepped on a garden fork. . . . My dear, I'm your friend, and I was your father's friend. I'm by no means finished with you—or disgusted. I understand it all."

"But what I did was unforgivable."

"No! The unforgivable part was, perhaps, doing the thing behind Bill's back. Much better if you'd told him straight away that you intended to have your experience with this artist. It was the shock of discovery that broke that husband of yours. You see that, don't you?"

Julia shut her eyes, shut out the brilliance of the crowd around her, shut her ears to the lilt of the dance band. She sat there, suffering hopelessly. She said :

"I know. I know now. Unfortunately one always learns these things too late."

"Of course you might have got away with it," said Charles Holland. "The accident was a horrible misfortune. But you took the risk of something like that, and there you are!"

"I wouldn't mind so much if I'd really been in love with Ivor Bent. But I wasn't."

"Of course you weren't. You just wanted the experience, and that isn't unnatural. You weren't really in love with Bill when you married him."

"I'm beginning to think," said Julia, "that sex experience and big thrills aren't of any value. At least, not the kind that entail intrigues and deceptions, and taking risks with other people's happiness. I don't think I gained anything through that night with Ivor, and I lost everything when I lost Bill."

"So you've fallen in love with him now, have you?"

Julia felt her cheeks burning. She had asked herself that question this evening and then repudiated the thought. She could only shrug her shoulders and give Charles Holland no verbal reply. He went on:

"A sort of swing of the pendulum. And nature has a way of being perverse. When you've got a thing you don't want it, and when it's taken away you do."

"Oh, Charles," said Julia, "you know I'd give anything in the world not to have dealt Bill such a blow—or Ursula Bent. I must have hurt her, horribly."

"Well, don't worry about her. She's got her husband back, and no doubt she expected something of the sort from him. But Bill had illusions about you."

Julia winced.

"Illusions," she repeated bitterly. "Yes."

"Well. He wasn't altogether justified in supposing you were absolutely contented. He knew you weren't in love with him."

"Everybody keeps saying that, and I've kept saying it to myself, but somehow it doesn't seem to excuse the thing."

"It isn't a question of 'excusing', my dear. Some men in your husband's place might have decided to forget all about it and carry on. But that particular young man of yours happens to be the kind that couldn't forget. He felt it was best to have a separation. Besides which, he may have some erroneous ideas that you prefer not to live with him."

"Whatever it is, the whole thing's a mess," said Julia miserably, "and I've got to get used to being without Bill, because apparently he's interesting himself in another woman at the moment."

"Who says so?"

"Oh—rumour."

"Never believe rumours," said Charles Holland brusquely. "Nine times out of ten they're false. And if I know anything about human nature, I'll lay you 100 to 1 that your Bill is just as wretched, and missing the old life just as badly, as you are."

Julia bit hard at her lip.

"I doubt that. I murdered his love for me."

"Nonsense. You hurt his pride—quite a different matter."

"The result's the same," said Julia.

"What are you going to do with yourself now?" asked Charles Holland. "You can't stay in town by yourself, killing time for the rest of your life."

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said Julia in a small, forlorn voice.

"You're smoking too much, young woman," said Charles with a frown.

"And drinking too many cocktails, and not eating or sleeping enough—oh, I know it all!"

He looked sadly into the large eyes which glittered so feverishly in the thin young face, and he thought:

"Pity Bill Daunt hadn't the vision to keep her with him, and go on trying to win her and blot out that other business. He could have done it if he'd made the effort. She's desperately unhappy, poor child."

Then he saw Julia's face flush to the roots of her hair. The slender body tautened, and a small hand clutched nervously at her bag.

"Bill!" she said under her breath.

Dr. Holland removed the cigar from his lips and followed her gaze. He saw Bill Daunt with a blonde-haired woman, in white, at his side.

"Dear me!" said Charles.

It was "Dear me" with a vengeance for Julia. Tongue-tied and powerless to move, she sat staring at her husband. He had not seen her yet. He was looking down at his companion. And Julia was conscious of a real pang of jealousy as she watched him smile at that woman whom she recognised as Marjorie Pryce. So it was true—Doris Robinson's story was not merely a rumour. Bill *was* running round with Marjorie Pryce. And Julia was a hundred per cent. feminine now, as she summed up Marjorie's appearance. Attractive, certainly. The "off-white" chiffon dress clung seductively to Marjorie's rather full figure. Her *blonde cendré* hair was coiled at the nape of her neck. She wore diamond earrings which sparkled as she moved her head.

Bill seemed to be enjoying what she said. And Bill looked well—fit and brown. As beautifully groomed as ever. That slightly superior way that he had of walking through a room was familiar to Julia.

But now that he drew nearer, she could see that although his face was brown, he was *not* looking well. Neither was he looking happy. His eyes had that lost and miserable expression which told her at once that he was frustrated. She was glad – fiercely glad of it.

She waited, almost in agony, for his gaze to fall upon her. When it did, he looked stricken for an instant, then recovered himself, and spoke a few words to Marjorie Pryce, who also looked at Julia, and seemed none too pleased.

Julia said: "Charles, do you think my husband's going to cut me?"

"Certainly not," said Charles Holland. "If he does, I'll go and wring his neck."

Julia giggled miserably.

"Perhaps he thinks I'm not nice to know any more."

"Don't be a damned little idiot," came from Charles Holland gruffly.

Then Bill, having deposited Marjorie Pryce in a chair, came up to them. For a moment the room and the lights spun dizzily about Julia. She heard Bill say :

"Hullo, Julia. Hullo, Dr. Holland. How are you after South Africa?"

Charles rose and shook hands with the younger man.

"Pretty good thanks, my boy. You've been abroad yourself, haven't you?"

"To Scandinavia, yes," said Bill.

His gaze met Julia's. He saw her face change from red to white and white to red again. For an instant they sized each other up. He thought : "She's looking rather marvellous. But so much thinner. Not well, either."

He made himself say :

"Funny, running into you like this."

"Yes," said Julia with unnatural brightness.

Bill became uncomfortably conscious of Marjorie whom he had left at her table alone.

He had been telling himself the whole evening that he had better not see any more of her. She was making it too obvious that she would like to include him not only in all her invitations, but in her future life. There couldn't be any question of that. He had told her during cocktails that he didn't mean to be divorced or to re-marry, and she hadn't taken it too well. He had tried to be friendly and to amuse her, but their evening was not being a success.

He had half made up his mind to see Julia to-morrow and ask her if she would have any objection to him going back to "Katherine's" by himself. The nostalgia for the garden and the old surroundings had become so strong that he could

not kill it. He felt that he must get back to the country until the end of the summer, anyhow. He didn't expect Julia to object, and after all it was his place, and she had no real say in the matter. But somehow he thought he had better discuss it with her. Lucky, running into her to-night.

Charles Holland looked at the couple through half-closed eyes and faced the possibility that this chance meeting might be the one thing in the world necessary to put an end to all the stuff and nonsense of their separation. It was as plain as a pikestaff that Bill Daunt was still head over ears in love with his wife, and that they shouldn't be living apart. Charles said aloud :

"Look here. I'm going over to the other table to introduce myself to that good-looking young woman in the white dress while you two have a dance."

"Heavens, no!" said Julia, with an hysterical laugh.

"Look here——" began Bill.

But Charles Holland was a determined man and, cigar in hand, he walked away and headed for the table at which Marjorie Pryce was sitting, powdering her nose in a fury.

Julia and Bill looked at each other, helplessly. Then Julia began to shake. And Bill, burning with embarrassment, said :

"This is very difficult."

"Is it?" asked Julia.

Bill pulled at his collar.

"It's damned hot."

Julia had to laugh in case she should weep outrageously there, in public. How like Bill to be so discomfited and not to know what to do with his hands or his feet or—with her. But something in her was singing as it had not sung during the four black, winter months of their separation; because she knew her Bill. She had not lived with him for three years without knowing him, and she was perfectly certain that he was an unhappy, dissatisfied man.

"It *is* hot, isn't it?" she said. "And of course one oughtn't to dance in August. But I do like this band."

"Would you like to dance?" asked Bill politely.

Then Julia stood up and said through her teeth: "Yes, blast you, I would."

A faint gleam shot across the darkness of Bill's horizon. Here was a familiar Julia. She had that wilful challenging look on her face which was so familiar to him, just as though they were having one of their old arguments which might end in her throwing a packet of cigarettes at him, or telling him to go to hell, when she didn't really mean it.

He knew that he loved her—more than anything in the world—and that he had never stopped loving her and never could. And it didn't matter about that other fellow in her life. After all he'd only been in it for one night and he, Bill, had been her husband for three years. Anyhow he couldn't go on as he had been trying to all these months, in solitary despair without her.

"I hear you do nothing but dash round town," he said in a frigid voice, put an arm about her, and guided her on to the floor.

"Oh, indeed?" Julia lifted her brows and spoke with equal coldness. "And who says so?"

"And that you're having a marvellous time."

"What about you? You're having a pretty good time, yourself. As a matter of fact I almost rang you up to ask you if you'd like a divorce."

"May I ask why?"

"I was told you wanted to marry Robin's widow."

Bill went red to the roots of his fair hair.

"It doesn't happen to be true. I've no intention of marrying Marjorie."

Julia gave a choked laugh.

"You can't very well. You're still married to me."

"According to what I've been told, that hasn't stopped you from——"

"From what?" she broke in, her eyes furious. "Be careful what you say to me."

He had to blurt out what was in his mind. That mind had seethed with jealous anguish, ever since Marjorie had dropped hints about Julia's behaviour with certain men.

"What about this fellow, Aubrey?—whatever his other name is."

"Oh!" said Julia with pursed lips. "So little Marjorie has been gossiping."

"Well, what about him?"

"Major Pethick is a good friend and nothing more. He's asked me to marry him at least twenty times and I've refused twenty times."

Bill looked at her dubiously.

"And young Corage?"

"You know that I wouldn't let Tim touch me if he was the last man in the world. How dare you listen to all these rotten rumours!"

Bill, distinctly lighter of heart, stammered:

"Well—I—you——"

"Yes—anything can be said and believed of a woman with any attraction who's separated from her husband!" broke in Julia furiously.

"I'm not accusing you -only asking."

"Well, nobody can accuse me of forgetting that I was married. I may have rushed round with a lot of idiotic people, doing idiotic things, but I've never stopped remembering that I was married to you."

Bill felt suddenly that somebody had lifted nectar to his lips and that he was tasting it. Julia was grand, and she was telling him all he wanted to know. Instinctively his arm about her tightened. His hand clasping hers tightened, too, until she winced with pain.

"Julia!" he said.

She drew in her breath and looked up at him.

"Well, Bill," she said in a soft, changed voice. "Have you missed me?"

"Damn it, yes."

"I've missed you."

"You don't mean that."

"But you fool, I do! I tried to tell you once before that I was terribly, terribly sorry, and that I wanted you to give me another chance."

He said:

"Don't let's discuss *that*! I've had a lot of time to think things over, and it strikes me that you're not the only one that needs another chance. I do, too. I failed to win you in the first place."

"Then rushed off like a lunatic without trying again."

"I didn't for a moment think you wanted to come back to me."

"You've always been so stupid about psychology, Bill. You *are* stupid!"

He broke into a slow smile.

"That sounds like old times."

"Isn't it true?"

"Yes, I think it is."

"And I've been stupid, too," she said shakily, "and bad and mad and anything you like to call me. But I'm almost suicidal with longing to go back to 'Katherine's'."

"So am I."

"Think of the garden now."

"I do nothing but think of it."

"The Michælmas daisies will be coming out, and the dahlias and the chrysanthemums."

He shook her a little in the circle of his arms.

"Shut up, Julia."

She threw back her head, cheeks flaming, eyes like stars.

"Why should I? I've missed it all as badly as you have and I want to go back—and nothing will stop me saying so."

"I was going to ask you if you minded if I got out the furniture and opened the cottage, as it isn't sold."

She gasped.

"You were going to do that—without me?"

"I didn't for a moment imagine you'd want to come too."

"And I've been telling myself that you hated the sight of me and wouldn't want *me*."

"I've never hated you. I couldn't. But I just had to let a little time go by before——"

"Before you could bear to see me again?" she finished for him.

"Oh, don't let's waste words," he said. "And don't let's waste any more time. Let's bury the past and take the car tomorrow and drive down to Lewes. We'll get out all the things and we'll start again together—that is if you really want it, Julia."

"Want it!" repeated Julia in a heartbreaking voice. "You old *idiot*, Bill, you don't know how much I've wanted it. Think of seeing Snoopy and Jealous again, and Alice, and dear old Orchard."

Bill thereupon went suddenly crazy and kissed his wife full on the lips, regardless of the fact that he was in a public place, and that dozens of people saw him. Julia, breathless and ecstatic, kissed him back. Then she said :

"*This* is not at all 'the old school tie'."

But he could only say :

"Julia, Julia, my *darling*."

They danced in silence for a moment, clinging to each other, absurdly happy and enormously relieved. A man was singing through a microphone an old favourite :

"You came, you saw, you conquered me.
When you did that to me
I somehow knew that it had to be.
A cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces;
An Air-Line ticket to romantic places;
And still my heart has wings.
These foolish things
Remind me of you."

Bill, breathing in the remembered perfume of his wife hair, told himself that that other man was dead, dead ar buried. From now onwards he, Bill Daunt, was going to mal Julia feel that he was the only man in the world.

The music stopped. Julia gave a deep sigh, drew away fro Bill's arms and said :

"So many 'foolish things' have reminded me of you wh we were away from each other. Oh Bill, we'll be so happy the future, won't we? Bill . . . . where are you staying t night?"

"At the club."

"No you're not. You're staying at my flat with me."

He walked with her across the dance floor, her finge curved in his. They were each wondering how they cou dispose of the companions whom they had brought to tl dance.

"That sounds a most brazen invitation."

"From a wife to a husband? It's perfectly moral, I assu you."

"Very well," said Bill pompously, "it is accepted, wi alacrity and thanks."

THE END

For three years Julia Gaunt had known the simple fact. She wasn't in love with her husband, Bill, and the knowledge had eaten its way into her heart, turning her from a gay young bride into a miserable, dissatisfied wife.

And now was the moment of truth. Her instinct told her to go far far away, to forget the whole business and start life over again. Deep down she felt sure that with much heart searching, she could begin again, and know true happiness, even without the attentions of other lovers.

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